

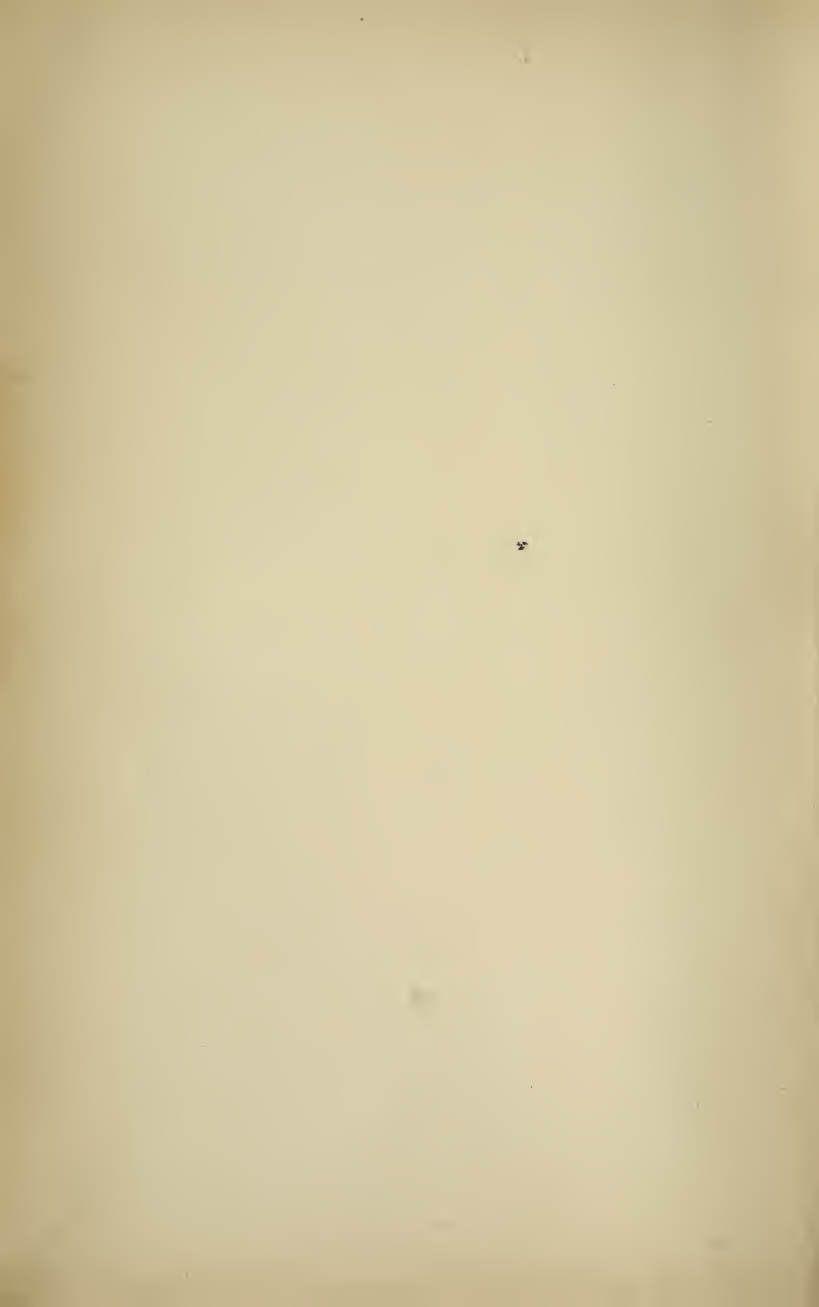


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THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER.



THE
SNARE OF THE FOWLER.

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER,

AUTHOR OF "THE WOOING O'T," "THE FRERES," "SECOND LIFE,"
"MONA'S CHOICE," ETC. ETC.

In Three Volumes.

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THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER.

CHAPTER XI.

LE MOT DE L'ÉNIGME.

It is to be doubted if any one of those high-minded persons who consider gold to be dross, and the coin of the realm filthy lucre, ever tried to go about without a penny in his pocket — literally without even a halfpenny to keep the devil from dancing in that *cul-de-sac*.

Granted that some princely millionaire given to experimental philosophy lodged, fed, and clothed him sumptuously every day, providing even a morning paper and a subscription at Mudie's to supply him with mental pabulum, would it not be humiliating to seek in vain within the coinless trouser or waistcoat pocket for wherewithal to reward the industrious crossing-sweeper or a shilling to secure

a lift in the ubiquitous hansom? Every heart would answer "Yes." To be moneyless is to be helpless, imprisoned, degraded, fettered, undone.

So felt Myra Dallas as she sat brooding over some needlework given her by her aunt, a couple of weeks after Leyton's visit to Mrs. Keene. She felt she had nothing to complain of; her aunt was kind, if somewhat silent, and certainly not a very cheerful companion. She had good food, nice, well-made clothes, a comfortable house to live in, and—what to many people would be the crowning excellence of her lot—a good-looking, young admirer ready to sigh at her feet on the smallest possible provocation; yet her absolute pennilessness spoiled everything. She scarcely liked to go outside the house when she had not a farthing wherewith to pay a cab fare, or procure any of the trifles of which everyone has need, while to ask Mrs. Dallas for anything that cost money was utterly repulsive to her. What! Ask more when she was given so much? The sense of helplessness had been eating her heart for some time, but on this particular morning it had reached a despairing pitch, and for the first time

Myra had confessed to herself that she wished—oh, how ardently!—that she had stayed with Mrs. Fairchild, no matter how dreary the place or how hard the work. What a fortune five pounds a quarter with freedom seemed to her now! Then there was her aunt's allowance; she would have given some of it probably had Myra elected to remain at Ruby Lodge. But the idea of refusing the proposition to become the adopted daughter of Mrs. Dallas had never crossed her mind; she could not have conceived that she would have been by degrees so “cribbed, cabined, and confined” as she was. The toils which entwined her were soft, as though the cords were enwrapped with cotton-wool, and yet they held her fast.

Mrs. Dallas never said her nay, yet she gradually found that it was impossible for her to do anything she desired—at any rate, in the way she wished to do it. When she wished to see Mrs. Keene or Mrs. Fairchild, her aunt first postponed the visit as long as she could, and then accompanied her niece.

On rare occasions she was permitted to go out with Dorothea in the morning, or to spend an

hour playing her accompaniments; otherwise she saw no one save Mrs. Dallas and her son. At first she rather enjoyed going to concerts and theatres with the latter, for which amusements Mrs. Dallas was always ready to grant permission. But Lionel was apt to grow too familiar during their return journeys, while her repulses generally angered him, and made things unpleasant on the following day.

Formerly Lionel's avowals of admiration only amused or nettled her. Now she felt fear and disgust, especially as she grew to notice that, instead of being displeased with her son for his attentions to Myra, Mrs. Dallas gave him every opportunity of being alone with her. A strange sense of insecurity grew upon her day by day. She reasoned against it and chased it away, only for it to return more strongly than before.

All this time she longed to see Leyton with an intensity that made heart and head ache. Twice she had observed his card when she came in from walking or driving with her aunt, and on exclaiming how unfortunate it was to be always out when he called, Mrs. Dallas said with a sneer

that if he really wanted to find them at home he would not call at the time when they were least likely to be in, adding, "But he has kept his promise to the ear"—a remark which rankled long in her mind.

If she did not see Leyton, however, she heard a great deal of him from Dorothea, who had formed what she considered a romantic attachment to him, which she chose to believe was reciprocated. She quite bewildered poor Myra with her confidences, and convinced her that only his pride held Jack Leyton back from being her avowed suitor. That he should be attracted by such a perambulating puppet was an endless source of wonder to Myra, but what did she know about the world of men and women?

As Myra sat pondering these things sadly enough, while she stitched some delicate lawn cuffs for Mrs. Dallas, who for a wonder had gone out alone, the door opened to admit Mrs. Dwyer.

The gaunt landlady had always shown an unusual degree of kindly attention to "the poor colonel's niece," as she always termed Myra when she spoke of her. At present she carried a tray

on which stood a large cup of tea and a plate of thin bread-and-butter.

"I thought you would be glad of a cup of tea, miss," she said, placing the tray on a little table and carrying the whole thing over to Myra's side.

"I am, indeed! Thank you very much. You are always very good to me," returned Myra gently, with a grateful glance at the speaker.

"Is it to your liking?" pursued Mrs. Dwyer, lingering.

"Yes; very much. Won't you stay a little bit with me? I am all alone."

"So I see, miss," said Mrs. Dwyer, selecting the highest and hardest of the chairs. "Well, *sometimes* one's own company *is* best. Are you quite well, miss? You look pale and worried like."

"Thank you, Mrs. Dwyer, I am quite well; and I really have nothing to worry me."

"Well, that's a blessing, anyhow. I thought you was lying down with a headache, or I should have let the gentleman in."

"Gentleman! What gentleman?" cried Myra, a

dreadful spasm of fear making her pulses surge for a moment.

"The gentleman who has called so often—as Mrs. Dallas has told me never to let in, especially if you was alone, for he is a bit queer."

"Why," cried Myra, clasping her hands, "you don't mean Mr. Leyton?"

"Yes; that's the name."

"Oh, why—why—why did you send him away?" cried Myra, starting up in her despair. "How long ago? Could I catch him?"

"Stay, miss," as she ran to the door. "It's more than twenty minutes since I sent him away. Dear! dear! I *am* that sorry. I did not know he was a friend of yours, miss, or he should have come in, I promise you. Don't you take on so."

For this last terrible blow was too much, and Myra, sitting down again, laid her head on the table and burst into bitter tears.

"He was my father's friend," she sobbed, "and the only old friend I have in all this wilderness of people."

"Well, never mind, miss. You tell him to call

again; and I'll see there's a mistake made, so that he gets in."

"It is all no use," said Myra, suddenly growing calm with despair, and wiping her eyes. "We can never meet again. Everything is against me." Then, observing the keen curiosity with which Mrs. Dwyer was listening and looking, she thought it necessary to offer some explanation. "My aunt is very good to me, you know; but perhaps I miss my young companions at the school, and—and—regular work, and I get low and fanciful. You—you'll not mention my foolish weakness, Mrs. Dwyer? I should be so much obliged to you if you will say nothing about it."

"No, miss. You needn't warn *me*. I would not say a word about it, not for a hundred pounds—that I wouldn't! And don't you either, miss. If you'll excuse the liberty, I would say, 'Keep friends with Mrs. Dallas—it won't do to offend *her*.' I know it may be venturesome of me to speak; but I have seen better days and no end of trouble, and I can see a good deal more than people think; and were I you, miss, I'd keep *very* pleasant with both Mrs. Dallas and Mr. Ashby."

Poor Myra felt distracted for a moment, between a dim sense that she ought not to be too confidential with her aunt's landlady and a burning desire to know what she was hinting at.

"What *do* you see, Mrs. Dwyer?" she asked, after looking earnestly at her for an instant. "I feel rather miserable—I don't know why—and you almost frighten me."

"I'd be loth to do so, miss, though it might be kinder to say what I think. Only if *I* trust you, you mustn't let on to Mrs. Dallas. It would be bad for us *both* if you did."

"I—I would never say a word—you must feel that."

"Well, I do, miss; for you seem a real lady."

"Then what do you see?" repeated Myra, a little impatiently.

"That they never let no one next or nigh you but their own two selves."

"That is because my aunt is still too sad to see many people, and she is rather too careful about letting me out alone," returned Myra, determined to uphold Mrs. Dallas. It was a comfort, too, to resist her own vague dread.

"Ay, that she is, miss," emphatically; "but in the colonel's time she never minded how late it was when you tramped back to St. John's Wood. *She* didn't know that her son stole out a while before to walk with you. She'd have made a nice row if she did. Why are you more precious *now* than you were?" this with an indescribably interrogative bend of the head to one side.

"You see, Mrs. Dwyer, my aunt had some reason to think I was an ill-natured mischief-maker at that time, so——"

"You? Is it you?" with a scornful, incredulous, upward toss of the chin. "If she believed *that*, she is not the woman *I* take her for. Well, why won't she let this gentleman—as looks *like* a gentleman—come in to see you?"

"Oh, I don't know. I daresay she thinks she has some good reason."

"Ah! Well, miss, if you have made up your mind to think her an angel, it's no use my speaking. Indeed, it ain't very wise of me to do so."

"Perhaps I ought not to listen, though you may be very sure I will never say a word about what you say. You ought to know, Mrs. Dwyer,

that I am very, very poor. Indeed, I have no money at all; and though my aunt treats me like a daughter, I am dependent on her charity."

Mrs. Dwyer paused and slowly raised her eyes from the floor till they met Myra's with a warning look, then she said impressively in a low tone, "That's just the queerest thing about it!"

"You are kind yourself, Mrs. Dwyer," said Myra, gravely. "Why do you doubt the kindness of others?"

"Because I have lived longer than you have, miss. I'll say no more about Mrs. Dallas; but I *will* say—for it's my duty—that, though he can be nice and smooth and elegant, young Mr. Ashby ain't nice really. He ain't a gentleman. He's a regular limb! Why, there's my Sarah's brother; he's a waiter at the Melford Arms—it's the public-house near the station—and my young gentleman is there often and often; and plays billiards, and bets on the game; he loses heaps of money, and wins a lot, too, sometimes. *He* ain't nice by no manner of means! He *is* desperate fond of you, miss, but don't you have nothing to say to him! *that* I'll stick to."

"I am very, very sorry to hear you say so, Mrs. Dwyer. It is very bad for my poor aunt!"

"I don't think she knows nothing of it, though I believe she is real fond of him. More fool she! Now, Miss Dallas, you may think me a meddlesome fool, or not, as you like; there is one thing I *do* ask you to do, and beg you will be guided by me. I went into your room this morning to put a new cord to your blind, and I see that beautiful sapphire ring lying on your dressing-table."

"Yes! It was careless of me; but I was a little late, and forgot it."

"Well, miss, you take my advice: neither wear it, nor leave it about, nor yet put it in your drawer. You take a bit of narrow ribbon and hang it round your neck, under your gown, and never let anyone know nothing about it. It's too much of a temptation for people, such things lying about"—this in a most significant tone.

"Yes, of course! But then Sarah is so honest and respectable!"

"So she is, miss. But there are more people in the house besides Sarah! I have a charwoman twice a week; not that she would touch it, poor

soul! but—" solemnly—"that ring is worth twenty pounds, at least, and—*nothing* is safe from the clutch of a gambler!"

Myra laughed. "Why, Mrs. Dwyer, do you think Mr. Ashby would steal?"

"God knows, miss!" Then, with earnest entreaty, "*Will* you do as I ask you, miss? You'll be sorry if you do not!"

"I think you are a little fond of me, Mrs. Dwyer. I will do it to please you, only——" she paused and coloured.

"*I* know, miss. You have no ribbon, nor a penny to buy it with. I'll bring you some narrow black silk braid, it will do as well." She hurried away, leaving Myra full of amazement, yet somewhat tranquillised.

To take out one's dim terrors, and hold them up to the daylight, does much to diminish them.

Mrs. Dwyer quickly returned. "There, miss, you put it in your pocket, and go put the ring round your neck, and never let no one cast an eye on it. If either of them asks for it, say you lost it. Hold on to it tight; it means twenty pounds, any way."

"I could not say that!" smiling. "But they will not think of it."

"Don't you be too sure! Hey, that's her ring; ain't she in a hurry! The peg's in the latch. I hate people creeping in with a key. You must not see her now. Gather up your work, miss, and go to your room; it's warm here with the big fire. As soon as you're up I'll open the door. Tie on the ring *at once*, and be sewing hard by the time she gets up; don't be in a hurry." A second peal of the bell resounded before Mrs. Dwyer, with much deliberation and a stolid face, opened the door.

"Did you not know I took the key?" cried Mrs. Dallas impatiently, with an angry light in her eyes.

"Yes, 'm. That stupid Sarah has been cleaning here. She must have put in the peg, for fear the door might be opened on a sudden."

Mrs. Dallas looked keenly and suspiciously around.

"Anyone called?" she asked.

"Yes, 'm, that Mr. Leyton," handing her a card.

"Did he ask for Miss Dallas?"

"Yes, 'm."

"You didn't let him in?"

"Law, no, ma'am!"

"Nor mention him to her?"

"Certainly not, ma'am, on no account."

"Very right! He is not exactly a desirable acquaintance for my son." By this time she had opened the dining-room door.

"Where is Miss Dallas?" imperiously.

"In her room, 'm, I think. Leastways, I met her going upstairs half an hour ago; she said it was rather warm in the dining-room."

Mrs. Dallas's face relaxed, and she turned into the room, while Mrs. Dwyer went on kitchenwards. "Icy creatures need cold," she thought with a contemptuous curl of her full lip. "This room is quite comfortable." A couple of notes lay on the chimney-piece. She opened one.

"Another invitation from Lady Shirland; she is most friendly. I wish I could go. It is just what I wanted, this admission into the inner circle of her acquaintance; but I must *not*. Not till this business is finished. If I do not go out, Myra *cannot* go without me! Heavens, how difficult it all is, and how swiftly time goes! I thought all would have been finished by this. From Lionel," look-

ing at the second note, "what can *he* want!" She tore it open, and read:—

"MY DEAREST MOTHER,—As I am going to annoy you, I write to avoid a scene. Can you, and will you, advance me one hundred and fifty pounds? asking no questions, until we complete our grand *coup*. I am in sore need, and I know you have the money. Leave a line on my bedroom mantelpiece—to say 'Yes.' I shall not be in till late. We must hurry up. Ever your attached son—L. ASHBY."

Mrs. Dallas read this missive with pale cheeks and blazing eyes; then she read it again, and crushed it in her hands.

"A hundred and fifty pounds," she murmured. "What *can* he want with such a sum? It is not so long since I gave him a hundred. He does not seem to have any extravagant habits. His fancy for Myra keeps him straight in some directions. My God! does he gamble? It is in his blood. If he does, hope, ambition, everything is over. A dose of chloroform would be the wisest ending. No, Lionel, you shall not rob me—you shall not have a hundred and fifty pounds unless I know why and wherefore."

She sat down to her writing-table, and traced

a few lines, which she put into an envelope and addressed to her son. Then she rose, went to his bedroom, which was on the same floor, and placed it on his chimney-piece.

"I must see what Myra is about. That girl puzzles me," mused Mrs. Dallas, as she slowly mounted the stairs. "She is gentle and accommodating, but there is something in her mind, or whatever we think with, that I cannot get at; and no one can completely influence another as long as a mental nook or corner is hidden. I feel that she does not trust me as she did, yet I am certain no one has had a chance of counteracting my influence. No. Has she seen or done anything unknown to me? She is stupidly frank; it would be difficult for her to tell a lie—now, at least; once she began, a little practice would make it easy enough. And why is she not in love with Lionel? Women are ready enough to like him. She is just at the age, too, when a lover is almost a necessity. Lionel *must* be a charming lover. It would be better if he were a little more sentimental; these cold, fanciful Northern women don't know what they want. *He* must teach her. I

hope she is not going to give me much trouble, or the sort of liking I had for her will turn to dislike, which will make the part I have to act much harder." These reflections brought her to Myra's door, which stood half open.

Myra was sitting by the open window, her workbox and the strips of fine cambric she was stitching on a small table beside her. She was paler than she used to be, and to-day her lips looked white.

"My dear," said Mrs. Dallas kindly, "you ought not to sit in a draught."

"I do not feel it," returned Myra, meeting her eyes with a smile and also a slight increase of colour.

"Nevertheless, it is not safe. *I* should catch my death of cold if I sat there ten minutes, but" —a sigh—"you are young, dear, with all the strength that youth and bright hopes can give, and I am beginning to feel the wear and tear of a rather disappointed life. Come down with me, Myra. I miss you when you are not by me."

"No one sees much sign of wear and tear about *you*, aunt," said Myra, looking at her with

genuine admiration. "Many a young girl would be thankful to look as well as you do"—and she gathered up her work in preparation for her return to the dining-room.

Nothing facilitated the task of doing the amiable which Mrs. Dallas for some reason had set herself like Myra's appreciation of her good looks. Flattery was very sweet to her semi-Oriental nature, and when Myra spoke thus she felt a passing emotion of benevolence towards her.

"Go on down, dear," she said. "I will leave my bonnet and cloak in my room."

When Mrs. Dallas joined Myra, she took up the newspaper, and after looking steadily and softly at her niece, observed:—

"I am not at all satisfied with your looks, Myra; you have no colour at all."

"I never had much, aunt."

"True; but you are pale with a difference, and your eyes are heavy, especially this morning. Nothing has occurred to disturb you? You have not seen anyone?"

"No, indeed, nothing; nor have I seen anyone"

—but the memory of her conversation with Mrs. Dwyer sent the quick tell-tale blood into Myra's cheeks.

“You will be quite confidential with me, dear!” continued Mrs. Dallas. “I try to be a mother to you, to atone for my past errors; all I ask in return is that you should be a confiding daughter.”

“Oh, yes—certainly; whenever I have anything to confide,” said Myra, laughing good-humouredly.

“She is hiding something,” was Mrs. Dallas's mental comment.

* * * * *

When Leyton was sent away sorely disappointed from Melford Road, he turned his steps towards Caterham Gardens, and walked for a few minutes in a slow and undecided manner until his attention was caught by a face in a passing brougham.

“By all that's lucky!” he exclaimed, half aloud, “the angelic Dorothea. Driving away from home, too; means she is going out to luncheon somewhere. Shall I venture to call on Lady Shirland at this early hour? Yes, she is always uncommonly good to me, and, any way, I'll risk it.”

Quickening his pace, he pressed on.

Lady Shirland was at home, and sitting somewhat wearily in the pretty room generally used by her step-daughter and herself in the morning. She had let the *Times* drop from her hand, and sat drowsily thinking over the past and present. Life, on the whole, had been a weariness to her. She had been always poor, though high-born, and her poverty had always been in her way. In her bright girlhood she had been more in love than she ever acknowledged, even to herself, with an equally well-born and penniless young Hussar.

They were not sentimentalists. They understood each other, and heartily regretted the impossibility of marriage in their circumstances. He went away somewhere, and straightway forgot his passing fancy, marrying a rich woman and thriving to his heart's content. Her memory lasted longer, and pervaded her being with a faint, sweet perfume of bygone delicious possibilities, like that of the dried rose leaves and spice in pot-pourri.

Then, after a good many years, she went and did likewise, only her husband had more rank

than wealth; and when, after some years of nursing and kindly care, he left her—no longer young, and by no means rich for her station—she accepted the plebeian Browne, who wished to give his adored daughter a titled chaperon.

Lady Shirland secured a good settlement on the tacit understanding that she was to do her best to arrange a brilliant marriage for Dorothea.

At the end of that young lady's second season the paternal Browne took ill and died, and Lady Shirland found herself hampered with a daughter not exactly after her own heart. Years had tamed what social ambition she had once possessed; and although she paid her share of the house-keeping, residence with the wealthy Dorothea secured the free use of many luxuries and the power of saving a good slice of her income. There were times when Lady Shirland longed for peace; for a real home of her own and a more congenial companion than the accomplished Dorothea.

"Mr. Leyton," said the footman.

"Dear me!" cried Lady Shirland, rousing herself with a start. "I am very glad to see you. But has anything gone wrong?"

"Nothing—unless I am wrong in presenting myself at this improper hour. It is so long since I saw you that, being in this neighbourhood, though at an ungodly hour, I thought you might admit me."

"You are a good boy not to pass me by. I am all alone; and it is a godsend to have a pleasant companion," said Lady Shirland, ringing the bell, which was immediately answered. "Thomas, Mr. Leyton will stay to lunch. You will, of course?"

"Well, yes; with great pleasure."

"Now, pray, tell me how comes it that you have not been near us for an age?"

"I have been a slave of the brush for some weeks. The light has been good, and——"

"You had better make up your mind to be a slave of the ring," interrupted Lady Shirland. "Do you know you are a young man I have no patience with?"

"I am very sorry to hear you say so. May I ask why?"

"I will tell you when——"

"Luncheon is ready, my lady," said the footman.

“When I have recruited exhausted nature,” added Lady Shirland, rising and taking Leyton’s arm.

The first fifteen minutes were very properly devoted to the duties of the table—duties never neglected by Lady Shirland, who loved dainty dishes. Nor was Jack Leyton an unappreciative guest.

“How is Miss Browne?” he asked, when the servants had withdrawn.

“Very ill,” returned the dowager, “and much occupied. She has found a new doctor and a new disorder.”

“Perhaps one brought on the other,” suggested Leyton.

“I will not commit myself. Really Dorothea is a dear, affectionate girl, and has a crowd of good qualities. Her only little follies are about her health and her taste for quacks. She has a feminine longing to put faith in some man. If she had a sensible husband we should hear no more of these fads. She would be a devoted wife.”

“No doubt,” said Leyton, with an indescribable glance at his hostess.

"You would like a cigarette. Pray, don't mind me."

"Couldn't think of it, Lady Shirland."

"Nonsense! Men always smoke when they come here. We should have been woefully shocked at such a thing when I was young; but, dear me! the shocks of yesterday are the soothings of to-day. Tell me what brought you to the neighbourhood so early."

"A very fruitless errand—an attempt to find Mrs. and Miss Dallas at home."

"Well, you succeeded *this* time?"

Leyton shook his head.

"Mrs. Dallas was here this morning for a moment *en passant*. She left some Indian embroidery for Dorothea to copy, or some such nonsensical time-wasting device; and she was *alone*. Depend upon it Miss Dallas *was* at home."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Leyton, with such a look of annoyance that Lady Shirland's attention was roused.

"Why do you hunt after those people so persistently, Jack?"

"I don't hunt them; but I want to see my old friend's daughter."

"You have been unlucky, I grant, but there's something more. Speak out, my dear Jack."

"Your cruel words just now have frozen up the fount of confidence," he returned, laughing. "Why have you no patience with me, Lady Shirland?"

"It is a long story. I'll answer it with another why. Why did you destroy your prospects by throwing up a good profession and wasting a good start?"

"You mean the army? Because if I had not taken the initiative, it would have rejected me. I am innately lawless. I might lead if I had a chance; I cannot follow."

"A confession of weakness, my dear young friend."

"Yes, I think it is, Lady Shirland; still, 'It is my nature too.' I was conceived in some Bohemia of the soul, and I can only 'light on my own box.'"

"Nonsense!" cried Lady Shirland. "We are all born under social laws which, on the

whole, are the outcome of human necessities; therefore they are the best we can get. Do you think you have done yourself any good by thus kicking against the unavoidable pricks?"

"Well, I have done myself no harm. In short, though probably I shall never do much in painting or daubing, I have found my natural niche; and, Lady Shirland, marvellous to relate, I begin to make money—at least, what I consider money; you would consider it a crossing-sweeper's copper. I got so low before I went to Egypt that decent pay seems a fortune to me."

"I cannot understand you, Jack. I suppose you have a history that would account for your disappearance, and much besides."

"Everyone has his history."

"Of course," she returned, "and I am not going to ask for yours. You have evidently played ducks and drakes with fortune. Why don't you marry money? Let us be quite confidential. Why don't you marry Dorothea? You might do worse; she is not half bad, she has the habits of good society, thanks to me, and she has a certain income of three thousand a year, besides

my poor jointure when I die. Why don't you try your chance with her? I think you have a good one."

"Poor Miss Browne!" said Leyton, laughing. "What has she done to be thrown at the head of an unworthy sinner like myself?"

"Oh, I can trust you, and I should like to do you a good turn."

"Don't trouble about me, Lady Shirland. I am a confirmed bachelor; no money would tempt me to shackle myself with the chains of holy matrimony."

"What nonsense! You cannot be nine-and-twenty."

"I assure you I have seen the end of my thirtieth year."

"I think you are mistaken. However, if you do not care for women, why are you so keen about seeing this Dallas child?"

"I never said I did not like women. I do not like the idea of marrying; that is quite another thing. Now I am going to be confidential in my turn. I daresay you will think me an idiot; if so, please do not say it, for it will check my

flow of thought. You are very fond of Mrs. Dallas?"

"No, Jack, I am not very fond of anyone but myself; but I like her, and I admire her. She is pleasant to the eye, soft and sweet to the ear, and her care of poor dear Colonel Dallas was beyond praise. No doubt it was well worth her while; even so, we have no business with people's motives, and a woman who has the power to work long and steadily towards any particular end is deserving of respect. I certainly like her."

"Well, in the teeth of this liking, I am bold enough, or foolish enough, to fancy that she is keeping Myra Dallas against her will—that she is cutting her off deliberately from all her old friends."

"From all her old friends!" interrupted Lady Shirland. "Why, the poor child *has* no friends. You must be out of your mind to fancy such a thing, Jack! What possible object could Mrs. Dallas have in cutting her off from her friends, if she had any? Do you know she is that poor, crazy Fred Dallas's illegitimate daughter?"

"I do," returned Leyton, in a low tone.

"Then what object *could* Mrs. Dallas have? I confess when I heard of this wonderful act of benevolence on the part of Mrs. Dallas, I *was* a good deal puzzled; nice as she is, it did not seem quite like her; but I think I have found *le mot de l'énigme*."

"What is it, Lady Shirland?"—very earnestly.

"You know our handsome friend is quite silly about that son of hers, and an uncommonly attractive young fellow he is. Now, I believe he is determined to marry the girl. I have seen them together, and if I am not much mistaken, he is dangerously in love with her. The mother wants to bind the boy to her by giving him the wife he wants, and thus create a home for herself; so she has taken the girl away from school to train her a little, and in a few months, no doubt, the wedding will take place. It is perhaps a large-hearted kind of wisdom, with just a dash of sensible selfishness which makes it quite credible; yet I should have thought Mrs. Dallas was more ambitious."

"This solution satisfies you?" said Leyton, after a moment's thought.

"Doesn't it satisfy you?"

"It ought, but somehow it does not."

"Ah, that comes of cultivating your imagination till probability is too flavourless to be accepted. If you care for the future of that very interesting Miss Dallas—I even think her more than pretty—you ought to be glad there is so fair a prospect before her."

"What! to marry a brute with a dash of the tar brush?"

"My dear boy! just remember the brush *she* is tarred with!"

"No matter! There is something I do not like in the whole affair. But there is no use in talking to *you* about it, I see; only do not mention my fancies to anyone."

"Trust me! And, Jack, keep yourself disengaged next week. I will get Mrs. Dallas to fix a day to dine, and ask you to meet the trio; closer observation would convince you." Here the footman entered.

"If you please, my lady, Sir Everard Stapleton is in the drawing-room."

"Very well. I am coming directly."

“Then I will say ‘Good-morning,’” said Leyton. “Remember, I will come to dinner on the shortest notice.”

“Thank you! So sorry our pleasant *tête-à-tête* is interrupted! Sir Everard is rather dull, but steady and distinguished. The *very* thing for Dorothea! but she will not look at him. Good-bye! Don’t stay away so long in future.”

CHAPTER XII.

GLIMPSES.

IT was many a day since Leyton felt the elixir of life—that is, quick, warm blood—coursing so rapidly through his veins as it did that morning when he left Lady Shirland, and struck northward in the direction of his own abode.

Yes! Lady Shirland was right. The shelter of a respectable home, the settled security of married life, was the best ending her friends could wish for the poor, blameless little waif, whose existence was an offence to well-behaved society; but, somehow, the idea was absolutely intolerable to Jack Leyton.

He had to the full that unreasoning contempt for Eastern humanity which is inherent in Englishmen, and is always intensified by a residence in India. He conjured up a picture of Lionel Ashby exceedingly unfavourable to that dainty youth.

Fancy painted the only son of Mrs. Dallas as

very dusky indeed, with straight features and opal-coloured whites to his sleepy, rolling eyes; with manners soft to cringing; a subtle intelligence, narrow and keen; and a flattering tongue, quite as ready to speak lies as the truth.

No doubt this fancy sketch differed widely from the original, but for the moment it was intensely real to Leyton. About the companion picture of Myra, there could be no mistake, however. Every line and curve of her slight, willowy figure, of her earnest, pathetic face, was graven on his memory; the peculiar repose of her attitude when she leant back in her chair, repose so complete that it suggested something of exhaustion. There was a restful composure in her every movement, not without dignity: and what improvement could anyone desire in that pale, thoughtful face, with its irregular features and rare blue eyes? Then her extreme naturalness, her way of speaking with occasional pauses, as if she had thoughts to express which she could not easily fit with words; and when she did find them, with what eager warmth they would come! And she knew something of art, she had been born and brought up under its divine

influence. She might not have the force, either mental or physical, to become an artist; but she had a wonderful instinct for art, a gift of true perception. That an Oriental, steeped in fleshliness from his birth, should be the husband of this delicate, lily-like English girl, whose touches of strength and conviction moved one to tenderest respect! That he should have the right to fold her in his arms, and kiss that sweet, sad-looking mouth! It was altogether an infernal desecration! Leyton felt he would willingly murder him to prevent it. "Gad! I wish I could twist his neck," he muttered half aloud. "I daresay I *could*, easily. Why it would be better for her to marry a wandering beggar like myself, though marriage is the last folly I'd care to commit. I should be almost tempted to make the sacrifice for her sweet sake, only it would be sacrificing her, too! Heaven knows! she *may* fancy that darkey fellow! Women like her know so little of themselves, or the life about them! For them, the men they meet are mere lay figures, which they drape with whatever colours and qualities they choose! By and bye, when time and experience tear away the cloth of gold in which they have

wrapped their puppets, and they see the common deal from which they have been shaped—the stiff joints, the uncouth limbs that feminine fancy has decorated with the finery of heroic tradition—no wonder there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth! If Myra should like this half-caste! But, no! I'll not believe she could until I see this young fellow—until I see them together. Great powers, if she does! There is no use in thinking. Whether Mrs. Dallas is an angel of beneficence or a devil of malignity I am powerless to help Myra—*if* she wants to be helped. I imagine if she were in trouble she would turn to Mrs. Keene, or to me; and her woman's wit would suggest some means of communication. I'll go and call on Wardlaw; he hasn't been at the studio for an age."

At this point of his meditations his thoughts and steps were arrested. A gentleman suddenly stepped before him and asked—

"Are you going to cut me, Mr. Leyton?"

A moment of bewilderment on this abrupt recall from the vasty deep of thought, an exclamation of "Captain Forrester!" and the two men were shaking hands.

"I was going to call on Wardlaw," said Leyton.

"He is out of town. Come with me instead. I am on my way to Christie and Manson's. There are some old cabinets and bronzes to be sold there. I want to have a bid for them; and these things are more in your line than mine. I should be glad of your counsel."

"All right," returned Leyton, glad to get away from himself. "I don't know when I was at Christie's."

"I am going on to Tattersall's after," continued Forrester. "My hands are pretty full just now; for I have both house and stables to furnish."

"Lucky fellow to have the wherewithal to do it!"

* * * * *

It was late when Leyton and his new acquaintance parted. Without being actually sympathetic, they liked each other. Both were straightforward gentlemen; and though Forrester looked on the other as decidedly insane, because he had left a poor but gentleman-like profession for the uncertainty of daubing canvas and selling his daubs,

he acknowledged to himself that society had, or thought it had, need of such fellows; and as it became him, being a man of wealth and importance, to do what was considered the right thing in his station, he was quite ready to buy Leyton's pictures on Wardlaw's recommendation, believing he had chanced on a bargain.

Though rejoicing in the possession of his deceased kinsman's fortune, Cecil Forrester liked to get the worth of his money, and was also thankful that the painter of a picture for which he had given a commission was a gentleman with whom it was not only possible but agreeable to associate.

They parted cordially, Forrester reminding Leyton of his promise to pay him a visit at Wickham Hall. He was on his way to join his regiment for the last time, he said, as he expected to be released from the service in about a month, when he would let Leyton know and fix the date of his promised visit.

Late though it was, Leyton determined to look in upon Mrs. Keene and report the ill-success of his attempt to see Myra.

"She is an honest-hearted soul I think, but, like women of her class—indeed, of all classes—she exaggerates things. As Lady Shirland says, what possible motive could Mrs. Dallas have except to humour her son? Perhaps it may be better for Myra to marry him, though I hope to heaven she will not. I am an awful fool still. There must be a dash of the woman in me somewhere to make me a victim to these vague fears. I'm not many degrees removed from honest Mrs. Keene herself in this matter. I swear I'll think no more about it until I have seen the trio together in the full light of day—I mean in full lamp-light. Fortunately, I haven't many engagements to interfere with Lady Shirland's promised invitation. Anyhow, I seem destined to return to the social world, after we had exchanged the cut direct for years. Perhaps the aftermath of life is going to be better than the first crop. No matter. Give me back—give me back the wild freshness of morning."

"Is Mrs. Keene at home?" for these reflections brought him to her door.

"Yes, sir. Please walk this way."

Mrs. Keene and Wilhelmina were at tea, and cordially welcomed Leyton, who was soon imbibing a cup of first-rate quality.

"I always like to see a gentleman fond of his tea," said Mrs. Keene, smiling on him. "It's a sign of steadiness and moderation, and that he'll make a good husband."

Here Wilhelmina giggled.

"If I can earn such a character so cheaply, I'll be a tea-drinker to the end of my days. I have not taken to tea long, though. I used to like the other thing—like it very much; but when I was once more on active service, I found I could do more on tea than on whisky or brandy, or even champagne."

"There, now! I am sure it is the best thing going. Well, sir—and have you seen Miss Dallas since?"

"No. I called to-day, but she was 'not at home.'"

"Ah, we all know that does not mean out."

"Right, Mrs. Keene; but it 'bars the door' as effectually."

Leyton threw an inquiring glance at Wilhelmina as he spoke.

"Oh, never fear our Willy," said Mrs. Keene in answer to it. "She's that fond of Miss Myra she would do any mortal thing for her; and Willy's sharp, too, I can tell you. She'll not let out anything she does not choose to."

"I am sure the young lady is as wise as a serpent——"

"Law, sir, that isn't a very civil speech," said Willy.

"You did not let me finish my sentence. I was going to add, 'and harmless as a dove.'"

"I don't think that mends it," cried Wilhelmina, with a pout.

"I am at the end of my ammunition," returned Leyton.

A short conversation ensued, in the course of which Mrs. Keene expressed her determination to beard the Dallas lion in her den and call upon Miss Myra herself.

"Why shouldn't I? I've often and often called on the ladies I have served."

"Why not, indeed?" echoed Leyton.

"Grandfather starts the day after to-morrow, so I'll pay my visit to-morrow evening, when he'll

be here to look after the place. I am sure to find her in in the evening."

"Pray do; no doubt you will see her. Remember we have no right to suppose Mrs. Dallas actuated by any but the best motives. I am afraid we have been rather fanciful on the subject."

"May-be, sir, but I am not often mistaken."

"Anyhow, be prudent with Mrs. Dallas; don't let her see you think her anything less than an angel."

Wilhelmina laughed merrily, and almost immediately afterwards Leyton left them.

That afternoon had been chiefly spent out of doors by Myra. Mrs. Dallas had been unusually conversational and agreeable. She had proposed an expedition to Regent Street, and on arriving there had made several small purchases, chiefly for Myra, to whom she presented a pretty jet bonnet-pin, a silk necktie, and a pair of gloves. On Myra remonstrating with her for so much generosity, Mrs. Dallas remarked that she considered her a daughter, towards whom generosity should be only limited by means. "Besides," added the affection-

ate widow, "my dear boy is doing so well that I have less need to care for him. I hope that before long he may be taken into partnership in the firm where he is now clerk. Your dear, kind uncle gave me the means to place him in that position, and he has but to prove his business qualities: these he undoubtedly possesses."

It was a nice bright day. The shops looked lovely, and the full tide of busy life flowing through the streets had an electric effect on Myra's young blood. After all, her aunt *did* like her; she was genuinely kind. Myra was more than half ashamed of the doubts and distrust which had eaten into her heart that morning.

At last it was time to return. As they stood waiting for an omnibus (Mrs. Dallas hated walking—and omnibuses too, for that matter—only she preferred twopenny to eighteenpenny fares) she looked into her portemonnaie and asked, "Have you any pence, Myra?"

"Me!" cried Myra, opening her eyes and laughing. "I think I have one halfpenny, but I left it at home; I did not like to carry my whole capital about with me."

Mrs. Dallas laughed too. "I must change a shilling then. I suppose I ought to give you an allowance, Myra, just for pocket-money."

"You do so much for me as it is," said Myra, colouring.

"Ah, well, it is not pleasant to be quite without money."

Here the omnibus came up, and the conversation ended. Myra, however, felt at once cheered and remorseful. Her aunt was evidently going to take away one source of uneasiness; she was really mean and suspicious to doubt her, but oh! how she wished she could earn some pocket-money. Surely she might! She would pluck up courage and speak to her aunt about it now she had broken the ice.

Aunt and niece spent a tranquil evening. Mrs. Dallas asked Myra to read aloud to her. She had borrowed a novel of fashionable life from Dorothea, and wanted to finish it, she said. It was a good substitute for conversation, and Myra's voice was soothing.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Dallas lay on the sofa and thought, undisturbed by any deep interest in the story.

At last Myra grew sleepy, and imagined her aunt was similarly affected. She laid down the volume, and stifling a yawn, exclaimed—

“They are all most uninteresting people, and seem to me quite unnatural. Don’t you think so?”

“Yes, quite”—in a tone of conviction. “I am a little sleepy; I really think I must have a cup of tea. Ring the bell, dear; we miss Lionel very much when he is out.”

“You will not think of sitting up for him?”

“Oh, no: yet he is rarely late, and one must not be too strict with boys.”

“I am sure, aunt, Lionel does just as he likes.”

“Ah, I must confess he is my idol. What would I not sacrifice for him? Whomever *he* loves is dear to me.”

Myra coloured deeply at the significance of her tone, and felt thankful for the occupation of putting out the tea and seeking for the sugar-basin.

“I fear he will not be able to accompany us on our travels,” continued Mrs. Dallas.

“I suppose it is not easy for him to get away,” remarked Myra.

"No, but he must have a holiday soon. He is looking very ill."

"Do you think so? I have not observed——"

"Why, my dear Myra, he is pale and thin, and his eyes quite sunken," in a slightly indignant tone.

"You are too anxious about him, my dear aunt. Of course a mother will see more than anyone else!"

"I am not a weak fool, Myra."

"You, a fool! No, indeed; but you are very fond of Lionel." Mrs. Dallas sighed, and an uneasy, fretted look came into her face.

"Ah, here is the tea! Put the tray on that little table near the fire. I never wanted a cup so much."

A few minutes' silence ensued, while Myra officiated and Mrs. Dallas drank her tea. "It is very nice to have you here to 'pour out' for me," she resumed with a soft smile. "I used to be so lonely when Lionel was out, and one cannot tie a young man to one's apron strings."

"No! I suppose men get tired of being always with women."

"*Very* tired, sometimes." Another pause, then, as if speaking out of thoughts, and gazing away as if at something unseen by her companion, "I am so glad that Miss Browne did not succeed in fascinating him!"

"I thought you would have been pleased if he had married her," exclaimed Myra, a little bewildered.

"At one time I might have been. I have seen more of her since. She is a nice, dear creature, of course; but she is really too old for him, and too rich; there is no happiness in inequality, and I only care for my boy's real happiness. Then, of course, Mr. Leyton is more suited to Dorothea in many ways. I wonder when they will be married."

"Are they engaged then?" asked Myra with interest.

"Not openly as yet, but from what Lady Shirland told me I should think it would soon be announced."

"What a beautiful studio he will have then," returned Myra with a sigh. "I do love a studio."

"You will enjoy the galleries abroad!" Mrs. Dallas proceeded to talk of her projected tour, and Myra entered heartily into her plans; in truth, the

only point of light and hope on her horizon sparkled in the prospect of escape from her present surroundings to new scenes and circumstances. Why, she could hardly say.

"Shall we be anywhere near Munich?" she asked when Mrs. Dallas had paused in her counting of the cost.

"I shall be very pleased to spend a few days there, if you wish."

"It would be heavenly!" ejaculated Myra, stretching out her hand for her aunt's cup.

Mrs. Dallas looked at it with a sudden slight knitting of her fine dark brows, and then asked carelessly, "You don't wear the ring your poor uncle gave you now, Myra?"

"No, it is rather loose for me, and I am afraid to lose it. I suppose I am growing thin like Lionel."

Mrs. Dallas smiled. "Perhaps you both need the same remedy. You had better let me get it reset for you, it would be far handsomer in a good setting."

"Thank you so much, dear aunt. I like it best as it is."

“Well, don’t leave it about.”

“Certainly not! I have put it safely away.”

Mrs. Dallas became very still and silent. Myra rang to have the things removed, and then took up the novel again; still Mrs. Dallas did not speak. At last she looked up, and said, “I am dreadfully tired and sleepy, let us go to bed.”

Myra was rather glad to be alone. As it was early, she rearranged some drawers, which were not exactly in good order; and then took out her little work-box, intending to put in a needful stitch or two before going to bed. There was, however, only the empty reel which had held white cotton, and she was obliged to postpone her mending. To-morrow she must ask her aunt for cotton, and Mrs. Dallas, who hated and despised plain work, was always badly supplied with such materials. She should like to go out and buy some, but to do so was impossible, unless she asked Mrs. Dallas for a few pence, and that was too painful. She had been so nice all that day, too! If she were in earnest in her promise of an allowance—and why should she (Myra) doubt her?—it would be so comfortable! but better still would be the power of earning for

herself. Oh, how degrading dependence is, even when leavened with love! and Mrs. Dallas loved her. She must love her, to take upon herself the burden of her maintenance; and yet—and yet, where was the answering “Yes” of her own heart? why did it not go out in warm, unquestioning gratitude to her benefactress? “How I wish she had not asked about that ring!” thought Myra, when she had put out her light; and a vivid picture of the first time her aunt had offered to have that ring reset rose before her. *Then* she looked on Mrs. Dallas as a cruel foe who had stood between her and the uncle she had been inclined to love so dearly, in whose kind, handsome face her father’s seemed reflected. How often her heart had swelled with a passionate desire to throw herself into his arms and ask him to let her be as his daughter! but Mrs. Dallas was ever near with cold, scornful eyes, to hold the sword of determined opposition between them. Yes! she well remembered that day. It was one of the rare holidays she spent in her uncle’s house, and more than two years ago.

It was the eighteenth of September, and her uncle had asked her how old she was. She said—

"Just seventeen. This is my birthday. I know Hedwig always gave me cake on the eighteenth, because it was my birthday."

Then her uncle said—

"Well, *I* must give you something, too."

He went away to his study, or sanctum, and brought back the ring.

Mrs. Dallas said that money would be more useful; but Myra had begged to keep it. Whereupon Mrs. Dallas offered to have it reset. Lionel, who was beginning to be troublesome about that time, and was sitting on the sofa behind his mother, had made a gesture and given her a look out of his big black eyes which said "Refuse" even more distinctly than words could. She refused, not because of this warning, but because she wished to keep her uncle's gift just as it was, and so she would always keep it; but, oh! how she wished to forget these details!—what would she not give for the rest of complete trust, especially when her faith in Jack Leyton had received a rude shock—for it did seem dreadful that he should marry Dorothea Browne. She was so funny, so "made up," body and mind—a sort of human palimpsest,

where one artificial writing after another had been superimposed upon the totally obliterated original text. Oh, how could a true man, an artist, take such a mass of oddity and flightiness for his life's companion? And Jack seemed so real—even ruggedly real—himself. What spell had fallen upon him?

Well, he was the one old friend she had—the one companion memory with whom she could hold communion—and he was lost, for Dorothea's husband could never be her friend again. He would be pervaded by the unreality which made intercourse with that susceptible damsel such a weariness both to flesh and spirit. Mentally she said good-bye to Jack; she did not even wish to see him again. Ultimately she fell asleep, with a hearty wish that she might return to the somewhat sordid independence of Ruby Lodge and the trying task of endeavouring to instil German and music into the unreceptive minds of the good-humoured girls who were more her companions than her pupils.

It seemed to her that she had slept long and heavily when she suddenly woke with an odd,

frightened sensation of fear and danger. The sound of voices grew upon her as she listened in unaccountable terror. They were not near, not beside her, and came to her as if muffled by some intervening substance. As her senses grew clearer, she knew it was Mrs. Dallas speaking in her own room, which was next to Myra's — speaking not very loudly, but with deliberate firmness. The answering voice was Lionel's, high-pitched, full of fury, with the echo of a curse in every syllable. She could not catch the words; she did not try, save that once something like an appeal to "all the devils in hell" penetrated to her understanding. A scornful laugh followed, and then a door was slammed with such violence that the whole house shook. Profound silence followed, and it must be confessed that Myra hid her head under the bed-clothes.

What could it mean? Was it midnight or morning? She had no watch; she could not ascertain. Could it be possible that Lionel and his mother had quarrelled, *could* quarrel so bitterly? That Lionel had a violent temper, or used to have a violent temper, she was well aware.

When first she came to London and he was still at the London University, he used to have paroxysms of rage, which partly disgusted, partly frightened her. Of late years he had always seemed amiable and good-humoured, and she might have even liked him had he been less oppressively attentive, though she could never quite get rid of that first impression of violence and cruelty. But that he should speak in such a brutal tone to his mother amazed and horrified her.

What mystery was gathering round her? Was she never to be able to guide her own life? She would rather go forth to earn her own living as a servant than live as she did, bound with invisible cords, groping blindly with bandaged eyes, ignorant of the forces at work upon her destiny. There was no more sleep for her, but silence and stillness gradually soothed her strained nerves.

When the breakfast bell summoned her next morning, there were no signs of a fray. Mrs. Dallas was looking paler than usual.

"Lionel was obliged to leave quite early this morning," she said, in explanation of his non-appearance; "and I am afraid you must have been

startled last night by the noise of a door shutting violently. I was. I fancy it must have been next door."

"Oh, yes; it quite frightened me," said Myra, instinctively speaking in a careless tone. "I lay awake a long time after."

"Not before?" asked Mrs. Dallas.

But the entrance of the servant with some letters saved her from the necessity of a reply.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DECLARATION.

LIONEL did not make his appearance at dinner that day either; and, in spite of her self-control, Mrs. Dallas looked anxious, and was even restless.

The two ladies were sitting together after dinner. Myra, at her aunt's request, had gone to the piano, and was playing some airs, from ear or memory, when the servant entered to say that Mrs. Keene had called, and wished to know if she could see Miss Dallas.

"Mrs. Keene!" exclaimed Myra joyously, rising and moving towards the door.

"Mrs. Keene!" echoed her aunt. "Let her come in. I wonder what she wants?"

Myra remained standing, and when her good friend entered, greeted her cordially with a kiss, whereat a frown and a scornful expression passed over Mrs. Dallas's face.

"You'll excuse me, ma'am," said Mrs. Keene, addressing the lady of the house, "but it is so long since I heard anything of Miss Myra, I thought I would just call to ask if you had gone abroad."

"Not yet, as you see," returned Mrs. Dallas with cheerful politeness. "Sit down, Mrs. Keene, and tell us your news."

"Well, my dear young lady, are you keeping quite well?"

"Oh, yes! *quite*. And is Mr. Keene himself again?"

"He is, miss, and quite happy, for he's off for three months to-morrow. I'm sure he'll never rest as long as he has a leg to stand on."

"And Wilhelmina?"

"She has a bad cold, but she's going down to my sister's. They live at Redworth; it's a very pretty country, and fine air. My sisters have a stationer's business and circulating library; very highly respectable business, I assure you. It was my poor father's, and I might have had my share, if I hadn't had a wandering fit and *would* go travelling."

Then there was a pause. Mrs. Dallas was perfectly

civil, but it was impossible to do more than "make" conversation under the watchful gaze of her eyes. A wild wish to carry Mrs. Keene away to the privacy of her own room flashed across Myra's mind, but she hesitated, and was lost.

"We hope to begin our travels in about a month," said Mrs. Dallas. "I assure you we look forward to it with great pleasure, we both need change. Don't you think Miss Dallas is looking pale and drooping?"

"To my mind, ma'am, she seems brighter than when last I saw her."

Then Mrs. Dallas inquired about the hotel and its success, and the system of management pursued by Mrs. Keene, paying her many compliments on her energy and powers of organisation. So the talk dribbled on wearily. Mrs. Keene's eyes frequently sought Myra's with anxious inquiring looks, but it was all in vain. They might as well have been miles apart for all the comfort they derived from this interview.

At last Mrs. Keene took leave. "May-be you will come to see me, Miss Myra, before you go away," she said as she took her hand.

"Oh, yes! we will pay you a visit, certainly," replied Mrs. Dallas.

"God bless you, my dear young lady!" said Mrs. Keene, adding so low that Myra guessed the word, more from the motion of her lips than from any sound she heard, "Come!"

"A very good sort of woman," was Mrs. Dallas's comment, as the door closed upon her. "But, Myra, you'll find this sort of friendship with a woman of her class tiresome and inconvenient."

"I cannot believe that," returned Myra with a sigh. "I am nothing so great myself that I can afford to throw away the friendship of a true heart."

"You must not undervalue yourself, my dear. One of these days, when you have a smart young husband, you will not care to have your evenings broken in upon by the visits of the landlady of Keene's Private Hotel."

"That is very improbable," returned Myra quietly.

"Why should it be improbable? Have you no ambition?"

"How could I?" cried Myra with an unusual outburst of spirit, "when my life has been one long

teaching of my own insignificance, at least since I lost my father!"

"You are not insignificant to *me*, dear child!"

"No! *You* are very good, but I cannot unlearn the old lesson quickly."

"Ah, Myra, you will find out how important you are some day!"

Sweet words to a young ear, but, somehow, Myra's was not attuned to them. Yet she felt so weary of the strife in her own mind between trust and distrust, that she resolved to throw her doubts to the wind for peace-sake, and try to enjoy.

Doubt and dulness are so abhorrent to the young, well may they cling to the brightness of anticipation; for if they did not believe in the mirage which merciful Nature spreads before them, how could they keep up their hearts through the stony desert across which we toil?

The following day was Saturday, and Lionel returned to the bosom of his family. He did not look very bright, but he made himself as pleasant as he could, and seemed on the best of terms with his mother.

In the course of the evening he mentioned that

he had an invitation to dine and sleep on the following Tuesday at the country house of the head of his firm, a very fine gentleman indeed ; perhaps he might stay till Thursday—he would if he were pressed. It was a pleasant house. There were two or three bright, amusing daughters, etc. etc.

Then he produced a new song he had brought with him, which he and Myra agreed was not worth the trouble of learning. Altogether he was very nice and brotherly, and Myra thought how much more quickly the evening went when he was at home.

* * * * *

The season was now rapidly swelling to high-water mark, and Dorothea Browne lived in a busy whirl, which quite swallowed up her benevolent intentions towards Myra. It was almost ten days since she had seen the charming widow or her niece, and when Mrs. Dallas and Myra called on the Sunday following Mrs. Keene's visit, they only found Lady Shirland, who welcomed them warmly. It was a pleasant visit to Myra, who found herself near a nice fatherly sort of grey-haired man,

one of several callers, who talked to her, and Myra was by no means shy when interested. The talk gradually turned on books and pictures, so Myra grew animated and the colour came to her cheeks. These indications did not escape Mrs. Dallas, who grew more convinced that there were many chambers in Myra's mind still to be explored.

"Who is that young lady?" asked the elderly gentleman, who was a well-known essayist, when Mrs. Dallas carried off her niece.

Lady Shirland told her name.

"She is unusually intelligent and natural for so young a girl. I suspect she has the making of a charming woman."

As they walked towards home, Mrs. Dallas thought it as well to warn Myra.

"I am always pleased to see you amused, dear, but perhaps it would be wiser not to talk so freely to a total stranger."

"What, only about pictures, and books, and things of that kind? It is such a relief!" cried Myra.

"Still, it is not quite prudent," persisted Mrs. Dallas.

“How tiresome everything is!” returned Myra, with some irritation; and lapsed into a mental repetition of her new acquaintance’s piquant and clever observations, while her aunt delivered a neat little lecture on the necessity of caution, reticence, and circumspection on the part of young ladies which nearly lasted to their own door.

It was curious to notice the effect which any individual action on the part of Myra produced on Mrs. Dallas. So long as her niece was quiescent, silent, inanimate, she felt a certain degree of faint liking for her; but directly Myra enunciated an opinion or showed the slightest desire or ability to stand alone, a tyrannical determination to reduce her to dependence, mental and physical, sprang to fierce life in her aunt’s mind, and demanded her suppression.

“I suppose we need not expect to see Lionel till to-morrow,” said Mrs. Dallas as they sat at luncheon the following Wednesday. “He promised to telegraph to me if he were to return to dinner, so I have not ordered any. I am going to leave you all alone, dear, for which you must forgive

me. I have, for a wonder, promised to dine with Mr. and Mrs. Deedes this evening. He has been frightfully overworked of late, so we are going to have some business talk in the evening."

"Of course, aunt, you would not mind me. I have another book—an old volume of Sir Walter Scott—which Mrs. Dwyer lent me, which——"

"Mrs. Dwyer!" repeated Mrs. Dallas. "How did she come to lend you a book?"

"I asked her for one yesterday when she came in to wind the clock; you were upstairs. You don't give me enough to do, aunt, so I always want something to read."

"Show me the book," said Mrs. Dallas peremptorily.

Myra at once brought her a well-thumbed volume which lay on a table between the windows.

Mrs. Dallas turned over the pages slowly with keen attention, while she thought, "If there was anything between the leaves, of course it has been taken out; but she would not have been such a fool as to call my attention to it if——"

"'Old Mortality,'" she said aloud. "I believe it

is considered one of his best, but I don't care much for novels myself."

"I love them!" returned Myra. "I forget everything but the story while I am reading, and that is a comfort!"

"Is your life so unhappy then, Myra?"

"I have made rather an ungrateful speech," said Myra penitently; "but I confess it is painful to be a burden even on the kindest relative!"

"Nonsense, child! Besides, you do not know what good fortune fate may have stored up for you in the shape of a rich husband."

"I should not like to be a burden on him either, aunt."

"What! are you going to set up as a strong-minded woman, Myra?"

"Oh, I wish I were strong-minded! but I am woefully weak."

"Anything is better than being obstinate."

When Mrs. Dallas set out to dine with her solicitor, which she did rather early, as he lived at some distance, Myra felt an odd sort of relief at being alone and free. It was strange what a sense of being watched had grown upon her! It was

ungrateful and unreasonable to feel like this, but there was the feeling, and she would not exhaust herself arguing about it. So she took her book and lost herself in its interest, till it was too dark to read any more by the fading light.

Then she lit the lamp and made up the fire. While doing so, it struck her that it was a good opportunity to write a few lines to dear, kind Mrs. Keene, just to assure her that all was well. "For indeed," said Myra to herself, "I have nothing to complain of, and that will relieve her mind. I have no stamp, nor a penny to buy one, but she will not mind paying twopence for the information. Mrs. Dwyer will post it for me. Perhaps I ought not to ask her! But, oh! I will. I know Mrs. Keene is anxious about me. When will my aunt give me the pocket-money she talked of? at all events, I cannot ask her."

She went to the writing-table, and had just opened the blotting-book, when the sound of the door handle turning made her look round.

She found herself face to face with Lionel. It was startling, but she did not much mind, for of late he had been very quiet and undemonstrative.

"Oh, Lionel! I did not think you would have come back till to-morrow?"

"I had intended to stay a day longer, but I felt dull; I had a headache, and a fit of homesickness! Where is my mother?"

"She is dining out!"

"You don't mean it! Wonders will never cease! Pray, where?"

"With Mr. and Mrs. Deedes; and I am afraid there is no dinner for you, Lionel!"

"It is no matter! I had a late luncheon."

"Then you would like a cup of tea?"

"Thank you! I would rather have a B. and S."

"Tea would be better for you."

"I don't think so! He rang the bell, and went to take out the cognac from the sideboard. Myra was sitting in the dining-room. Having despatched the desired beverage, Lionel declared himself much refreshed.

"How nice and bright and homelike it looks here!" he exclaimed, throwing himself into an easy chair by the fire; while Myra resumed hers beside the table which held the lamp, and took up her knitting, feeling dreadfully annoyed at this inter-

ruption to the free, peaceful evening she had hoped to enjoy.

Silence ensued. Myra's eyes were bent upon her work, but the sense of being watched compelled her to raise them. They met Lionel's, which were fixed upon her with an expression which at once angered and frightened her; but she could find no words wherewith to rebuke him.

"It is quite heavenly to sit here alone with you, Myra!" he exclaimed at last. "I wish my mother would never come back, then we could be by ourselves always!"

"For shame!" said Myra warmly, "to speak so ungratefully of your mother, who loves you dearly, and only lives for you! Why do you say such things?"

"Because," returned Lionel in a deep, quiet voice, and still leaning back in his chair—"because I should not care if all the world were swept away, if I only had you all to myself!"

Myra felt very vexed with him; but she had been accustomed to his almost boyish outbreaks in former days, and she did not perceive the force, the determined passion in his tone.

"I wish you would not talk like that, Lionel: it is very disagreeable! Why did you not stay and flirt with those young ladies your mother says are so fond of you?"

"Pah!" exclaimed the young man starting up and pacing the room, "the thought of any woman but yourself makes me sick. I was always in love with you. Long ago, I used not to think about you when you were out of my sight, but I used to fall in love over again whenever I saw you. And you were so hard and cold; the woman's heart in you had not woke up. Will it ever wake? Then I knew my mother was harsh to you, and accused you of mischief unjustly—why don't you love me, Myra?"

"I am sure I don't know, Lionel!" she returned, more moved than she had ever been by the tremor in his voice, the trouble in his eyes. "I am sorry to cause you any worry; but I really don't think I could fall in love with you or anyone! There are heaps of nice girls, much nicer than I am, who might be very fond of you, because *you* are nice too!"

"It is utterly cruel of you to talk in that distracting way. You cannot picture to yourself what

I feel. I tell you, Myra, if you will not be my wife—if you will not love me, and come to me and kiss me—I'll die!" He threw himself on his knee beside her, and tried to put his arms round her waist.

"Have you lost your senses, Lionel?" she said indignantly, as she pushed back her chair and rose up. "You only pain me by this folly. You ought to see it *is* folly. And how could we marry? You have no money, and I have no money. Your mother would be furious if she thought you asked me."

"Don't tell her, then," he replied, with a smile and cunning look, as he too stood up and leant on the back of a high chair.

"Yes, Lionel; I will tell her to-morrow morning. It is not right to hide anything from her; and I cannot live here if I am to cause pain to you and trouble to your mother."

"My mother will agree to *any* thing I set my heart upon."

"But *I* will not, Lionel. There is no use in talking any longer, it is only distressing to us both. I shall say good-night now."

She gathered up her knitting with a decided air, and turned towards the door.

Quick as thought young Ashby sprang to it, turned the key, and put it in his pocket.

Myra stood mute with astonishment.

"Lionel," she exclaimed at last, "how dare you! Open that door at once!"

"Not unless you promise to hear all I have to say."

"I will not listen to a word if you do not open that door; and I shall call Mrs. Dwyer."

Though Myra felt strangely frightened and extremely angry, she kept a cool, determined front.

"If I open it, will you stay and hear me?"

"Yes; but it must be open. Then you can say what you like."

Lionel hesitated, and then put the key in the lock, opened the door a little, and resumed:—

"You do not know what you are refusing now, Myra. I shall be well off—better off than you dream—and you shall share all I possess. Then you will be free and independent. You shall be my queen—no longer poor and lonely. Oh, Myra,

why *don't* you see that there is nothing left for you but to be my wife?"

"I don't see it at all, Lionel; and, indeed, you would be very sorry if it were so. I couldn't make you happy, because I should not be happy myself. Remember that, and just put it out of your mind."

"I cannot—and I will not!" cried Lionel. "Do not make me hate as well as love you. You *shall* be my wife—nothing shall keep you from me! Don't force me to be cruel to you, for I can and will be. Listen, Myra. You treat me as a foolish boy. You will find me more than you can resist. I am resolved you shall be my wife—my own, and none other's; and you shall kiss me now—a foretaste of all I shall have hereafter."

He made a bold attempt to catch her in his arms; but she was too quick for him.

With a sharp, angry cry of "Never!" she eluded his grasp, and, darting upstairs to her own room, securely locked the door.

Safe in her own sanctum, she sat down to meditate on this strange outbreak.

It had always been annoying to her to be the

object of what she considered his insolent attentions; but she never gave him credit for a serious attachment. His vehemence and audacity offended and alarmed her. Hitherto, as he said, she had thought of him and treated him as a foolish boy. Now there was something in his eyes—his voice—that impressed her with a sense of danger.

A shudder passed through her. She strove to resist the feeling; she despised herself for such weakness. What harm could happen to her? Lionel had a violent temper, and was vexed with her. He would forget his threats next day. Then her aunt would be against him. Perhaps she would see it was better that he and Myra should not be in the same house, and might send her away—not angrily, but as a measure of precaution. Surely she (Myra) might at least find food and shelter somewhere as a nursery governess! She was surprised to find that her heart leapt at the thought.

She was quite unambitious. Her young life had been so sad, so harassed, so lonely, that anything like certainty—peace, the sense of being of use to someone, dear to someone—seemed like a prospect of heaven. She could not—no, strive as she would,

she could *not*—find the smallest sense of home in her aunt's house. Something of peace and security clung round the idea of Jack Leyton; but he was virtually lost to her. She would probably never see him again; and she hardly regretted this.

So she dropped asleep—a vague dream of escaping; of having a desperate struggle to find hat and cloak; of finally running away without them; of being pursued and overtaken by Lionel; and, finally, wakening just as he grasped her arm.

It was daylight; and Myra thought she had been dreaming the whole night through; at all events, she felt as tired as if she had.

When Mrs. Dallas returned from dining (wherever she had dined), she found her son pacing the dining-room with hasty steps. His face was white, his eyes burning.

She stood a moment contemplating him, and slowly untied and removed her bonnet.

“You are unsuccessful, I see,” she said quietly.

“Unsuccessful!—yes. That girl has driven me almost mad. She has no feeling—no blood in her veins, only half-frozen water. She treated me with disdain.. Why is she different from other women?

She fled from me as if I were loathsome. Can it be that she despises the strain of Eastern blood in my veins?"

A flash of indignant light shot from his mother's eyes.

"If so, I shall tell her the facts about her *own* birth. But, Lionel, are you *sure* it was not stupid shyness or girlish coquetry that made her refuse you?"

"It is personal aversion," he returned bitterly, as he threw himself on the sofa. "She shrinks from my touch. She raises the devil in me. I love her, I thirst for her, yet I want to trample her under my feet."

"This is folly, Lionel; you must be cool, resolute, reasonable. You *shall* have this girl anyhow; but if you will be guided by *me* you may have her pleasantly. Tell me what passed."

Lionel recapitulated what had passed with tolerable accuracy, growing calmer as he spoke. Mrs. Dallas listened with profound attention.

"The game, to be thoroughly well played, needs more time than we can give to it," she said. "You are not slow and sentimental enough for the silly

girl, but what she wants or wishes is of small importance. You *must* be patient and prudent. Ask her pardon to-morrow, and undertake to be brotherly and all that sort of thing; then get her to give you a chance of winning her. We will get her abroad, and once in our own hands, away from all possibility of interference, it will go hard if we do not manage, without brutality of any kind, to compromise her in some way and make her willing enough to be your wife. Of course, we'll try fair means first; but, fair or foul, she shall be your wife before three months are over."

Something in the quiet, deep determination of his mother's manner made Lionel for the moment believe that all things were possible to her.

"I will act as you advise," he said, readily enough. "One thing I am nearly sure of—she doesn't care about any other fellow. I do not think it is in her to care for anyone."

"So much the better for her future husband. Women of that kind are gentle, submissive, and satisfied with little."

"I don't think you understand Myra Dallas."

"I sometimes doubt if I do. I sometimes catch

glimpses of obstinacy, of stubborn truthfulness—she would call it integrity—and then I hate her.”

“Ay, but you shall do her no harm,” ejaculated Lionel, looking distrustfully at his mother. “No one shall hurt her save myself.”

“You are a silly boy!”—contemptuously; “you say Myra is afraid I should be displeased at the idea of a marriage between you two. If she makes a confession to me, what line shall I adopt—approval or disapproval?”

“I don’t know; what do you think? Which would forward our plans best?”

“Disapproval might answer best, but it would be a waiting game; we cannot spare the time. If she speaks to me to-morrow, I shall act on the inspiration of the moment; and you, Lionel—you must apologise and explain, but in writing; don’t trust yourself in an interview. Come, it is not late; let us compose a touching epistle. Leave it on the breakfast-table, and I’ll send your coffee and toast to your room; you had better not meet in the morning. Tiresome girl! why does she give so much trouble?”

The letter took some time and the spoiling of several sheets of paper.

When it was finished and addressed, there was a brief pause. Then Mrs. Dallas said in a low voice—

“I can *not* make out what she has done with that ring.”

“Can’t you find it?” asked Lionel.

“No. I have looked through everything she possesses—lodging-house locks are not difficult—and it is not to be found. If she had lost it at school one could understand, but she has had it since she came here, and I am afraid to make any stir about it lest it might suggest suspicion. Suspicion may sleep for ages, but, once awakened, it is sleepless.”

CHAPTER XIV.

A PAUSE UPON THE BRINK.

WHEN Myra descended next morning, she was surprised to find a letter on her plate, a letter addressed in an unknown hand, and unstamped. She was the first to appear, and took the opportunity of opening it:—

“DEAREST MYRA,—” [it ran] “I cannot sleep without humbling myself before you, and asking your pardon for my outburst this evening. I know it was startling to you, and unbecoming in me. All I can urge in excuse is a state of mind you cannot, perhaps, understand. I have loved you so long, so fondly that I could not resist staking my all on one throw, and lost self-control when I felt the cruel stabs of your indifference. But, Myra, do not quite turn from me, only give me a chance of recovering your esteem. I swear I will strive to be worthy of you; I swear to control myself. I ask no return, unless, indeed, I am so blessed as to win your affection! I will try to be as a brother to you, if you will treat me with kindness—mere friendly kindness! You will help me to recover myself, for I have

not been as prudent or steady as I ought to be. I ask for no reply to this ; a word, a look when we next meet will be enough ; only forgive me, and help me to reach a higher standard. I do not want you to commit yourself to anything, only believe in the devoted love of yours—LIONEL ASHBY."

"Poor Lionel! I did not think he could write so well! in such a good spirit. If I can help him I shall be delighted, of course; but I am afraid I could never like to marry him. I almost wish I could! but, no, it is impossible." Here Mrs. Dallas came in. Myra did not offer her the letter, but she let it lie openly on the breakfast table.

That meal was discussed almost in silence. When the breakfast things were removed, Mrs. Dallas retired to an arm-chair with the newspaper, as was her wont. Myra moved about a little uneasily; she watered the ferns in the window, and put some coals on the fire, and then stood looking irresolutely at her aunt, who was half hidden behind the *Daily Telegraph*. At last with a sudden effort she exclaimed, "When you have quite done with the paper, I want to speak to you."

"Certainly!" said Mrs. Dallas laying aside her

paper, "I am always ready to hear whatever you have to say, my dear."

"Thank you!" returned Myra growing red and white. Then she hesitated and resumed: "This," holding it up, "is from Lionel. I want to tell you all about it."

"By all means, tell me everything! draw that low chair beside me." Myra, much encouraged, obeyed Mrs. Dallas.

"Did you see Lionel last night?"

"No! He had gone to bed when I came in," replied her aunt gazing straight into her eyes.

"Well, aunt. He came back quite early—about eight o'clock, I think—and we talked, and—and—I am afraid you will be very vexed—but he—asked me to marry him, and was rather angry because I said I could not, that it would be wrong to vex *you*. Then he was awfully angry, so I grew frightened, and ran away. I found this letter when I came down, and it is a very nice one! I must show it to you. You see he is very good, and is going to be sensible, so he will soon forget his fancy for me. I really do not wish to marry him; but if I did I would not, because it would be ungrateful to you, as——"

While she spoke Mrs. Dallas had been looking through Lionel's letter, and now she interrupted Myra with a deep sigh. "My poor boy!" she said. "Yes, it *is* a good letter! Ah! Myra, my heart aches for him! I know how deeply his love for you is rooted in his heart. I confess that while I was under a false impression respecting you I was very strongly opposed to the idea of his marrying you; but now that I *know* you, now that you have lived with me and I see your worth, my views are changed. I, too, thought Lionel's was a mere boyish passing fancy. This," touching the paper, "is the letter of a *man*—a resolute, true-hearted man. A marriage with you may not be wise from a worldly point of view, but, after all, happiness is the first consideration, and I see you are essential to Lionel's; therefore, my dear Myra, I retract all my objections, or rather, they have been removed so completely that I wish you to become my son's wife! Can I prove my regard for you more strongly?"

"No, indeed," said Myra touched and surprised, but also infinitely distressed. "I am sure it is more than I could have expected, and I am very grateful to you; but, aunt, you must understand that—that—"

I don't know how it is, I am sure Lionel is nice and pleasant, and good-looking, but I don't think I *could* marry him, and I do not think he would like me as a wife—afterwards, I mean.”

“Do not be obstinate and unreasonable, Myra! You have, no doubt, accustomed your mind to consider marriage with Lionel impossible, because it would be displeasing to me. If you think of all the advantages it would secure to you—a happy, secure home, for, though I am not rich, I have a competency, which I will share with you—and the ample repayment it would be to me for any service I have done you, to see my dear boy rescued by a wife such as his soul desires from the dangers and temptations of early bachelorhood——”

“I am sure I wish I could,” murmured Myra with an air of hesitation which misled Mrs Dallas.

“Do not decide anything, my love,” she said soothingly. “Let things go on on their old footing. Give Lionel the chance of winning you, and——”

“Of course, I should like to please you,” interrupted Myra earnestly; “but if, after a while, I am still of the same mind, do not say I deceived you

both or misled you. Indeed, aunt, it would be wiser to let me go back to school; or, if Mrs. Fairchild would not have me, Lady Shirland might find me some employment, which would be a relief to you and more independent for me."

"What!" cried Mrs. Dallas in angry astonishment. "Would you prefer drudgery to the comfort and repose of my home—the position of Lionel's wife?"

Regular work was an abomination to her sensuous, indolent nature, though to gain any especial purpose she could make strong and even continuous efforts.

"Idleness is even more tiresome than drudgery—though I am neither strong nor diligent; but latterly I have not cared to sit and dream as I used. I want more to be up and doing. I wish I could work—really work—in some studio and learn. I might earn money by-and-by—money enough to pay for the cost of teaching. But that would be a mere chance, so there is no use in speaking about it."

"There is not, indeed," said Mrs. Dallas harshly. She had great difficulty in hiding the indignation

Myra's words had raised. "I suppose you would like to study with Mr. Leyton?" she added, with an irrepressible sneer.

It was lost upon Myra, who was taken up with her own hopes and fears.

"Yes; very much," she replied quietly. "He can teach very well; but I suppose when he is married he will have a lovely studio and not let anyone but himself work in it."

"Very likely," said Mrs. Dallas.

Something in Myra's tone allayed her irritation: and she said to herself, "If she is perfectly free from any liking—any preposterous fancy for another—Lionel must succeed by fair means; and they are best."

"Well, dear," she resumed softly, "have patience. Follow my advice for a short time—a few weeks—and then, if both Lionel and myself prove intolerable, why, you may go and work to your heart's content—if you can get work to do."

"Yes; that is not so easy, I know. I shall, of course, do what you wish, only then you must not be angry if—if I do go away."

"Oh, no!" returned Mrs. Dallas drily.

"Thank you. You are really too good to me," said Myra warmly; then she rose, hesitated, and left the room.

Myra hesitated because she felt that a kindly kiss would have been the appropriate end of their conversation; but, curiously enough, though at times her heart warmed to Mrs. Dallas sufficiently to reproach its owner with coldness and ingratitude, it never incited her to offer her aunt a caress; and Myra was too much guided by impulses—in fact, she rarely disobeyed them.

Mrs. Dallas looked after her when the door was shut. Her face darkened, and she murmured—

"Fool! How can she hesitate? Ignorant as she is, it must seem to her like casting away high fortune. If she hesitates much longer, I will tell her that she is base-born—that few men would seek in marriage a girl who bears the stamp of shame. If she knew all! But I must take care. What does she want? What can she want? She seems utterly transparent; yet I cannot fathom her. Why trouble about it, or what she wills or wishes? She is friendless, helpless, penniless, and in my hands."

It was with no small trepidation that Myra came down to dinner that day. Lionel was already in the drawing-room; but Mrs. Dallas had not yet appeared when Myra opened the door. Lionel did not rush to meet her with his usual *empressement*. He made a step or two forward as she advanced, and said in a quiet, ordinary tone—

“Good evening, Myra. Come near the fire.” He drew a chair for her, but did not offer to shake hands. “It is quite cold,” he continued. “I hate the climate, and should almost like to return to India.”

Myra felt a sort of relief, but scarcely knew how to reply

“I think,” she said with some embarrassment, “that the long evenings make the cold seem more dreary.”

“Probably.” Then, after a short pause, he said softly, “Are we to be friends, Myra?”

“Oh, yes; I shall be very glad,” she returned almost eagerly.

“Thank you,” was his brief reply; and before they could exchange another word Mrs. Dallas joined them.

Dinner passed over almost easily. Both mother and son exerted themselves to talk on various general topics, which assisted Myra to regain her self-possession; and by the time they had taken coffee they were on their former footing.

"There is a great draught," said Mrs. Dallas when they went upstairs.

"The landing window is open," returned Myra, going to close it.

The staircase and landings up to the second storey occupied an annexe in the Melford Road semi-detached houses, so the window in question opened on the balcony running along the front of the house, on which also the drawing-room windows looked.

"Thank you, dear," said Mrs. Dallas when Myra joined her. "Pray see if these windows are fastened, for I feel so chilly."

Myra drew aside the curtains which hung straight across from side to side of the bay windows, and found one of the door-like French casements unlatched.

"How careless of Jane!" exclaimed Mrs. Dallas. "She has been very careless of late; indeed, I

have quite changed my opinion of her. I hope you do not leave your things about, Myra, for she might be tempted to take them—that ring, for instance?”

“It is quite safe, Mrs. Dallas.”

“I hope so, my love. It is not wise or kind to try the virtue of our inferiors too severely.”

Lionel, who could play his own accompaniments when he chose, now went to the piano and sang one or two ballads sweetly enough; then he came to the fireplace and asked if his mother cared for a game of chess.

“Thank you, no. I do not feel quite equal to so serious an amusement,” she answered. “By the way, I have a very kind and pressing invitation from Lady Shirland to dine with her on the twenty-sixth—to-morrow week: an invitation for us all. What do you say, Myra?”

“What do you say, aunt?”

“I think,” said Mrs. Dallas, “that I cannot keep you shut up much longer. We have refused so many kind invitations from Lady Shirland that I must say ‘yes’ this time.”

“I think you ought, mother.”

"And you, Myra?"

"Oh, I shall be very pleased to go if you wish it."

"Very well, I shall write an acceptance. It will be no party, of course; only morning dress, or I could not go. I do not think you have ever been to anything approaching a dinner-party before, Myra?"

"No, Aunt Dallas, never."

"I daresay it will not be your last," said Mrs. Dallas as she went to the writing-table to write her note.

* * * * *

The following evening Leyton, who was sitting alone in his not very luxurious lodgings, and deep in a book on the "Renaissance in Italy," was recalled to everyday life by a note from Lady Shirland:—

"DEAR JACK,—The 26th at 7.45. I have caught our shy birds—the whole covey—so be sure to come. It is the first day I am free; pray send the enclosed to your chum, Mr. Ardill. I don't want too many of our own set, and Wardlaw is engaged."

Leyton was free, and pleased to go. In fact,

it roused the keenest curiosity and expectation in his breast. To meet Myra at a dinner-party was a wonderful event in itself. She seemed so entirely out of the range of dinner-parties, tea-parties, balls, regulation parties of all kinds, that to encounter her in an ordinary social gathering was like transplanting Gretchen or Thekla from the pages of Goethe or Schiller into the supreme commonplace of London life.

“How will she look?—how will she behave?” he asked himself, “ignorant as she is of the shibboleth of the every-day world. Will the touchstone of society turn her simple grace to clumsiness, her sweet candour, her self-forgetfulness into tactless stupidity? I think not, yet who can tell? Then I shall see her with her captors—if they *are* her captors—and be able to judge how they stand to each other. I must go and see Mrs. Keene; she was going to call on Myra. I wonder if I am making an ass of myself by spinning a web of imaginary double-dealing and profound villainy, chiefly at the instigation of a kindly, credulous, wonder-loving, elderly soul like Mrs. Keene. Gad! I’ll go and look her up.”

Then, as it is apt to do in these mental exercises, the pendulum of thought, having swung far enough to one side, took the opposite direction and went the same distance on the other. After all, why should he form so bad an opinion of Mrs. Dallas without a shadow of reason? She was probably a warm-blooded woman, who would be strong in liking or disliking; her harshness and kindness to Myra might thus be explained. While she believed her a mischief-maker, no harshness would have seemed too harsh. When she discovered her mistake, no kindness would be sufficient, even to consenting to her marriage with her adored son. And after all, if the young man loved Myra well and pleased her, her life might be happy with him—better than poverty and uncertainty—only Leyton wished he had nothing but English blood in his veins, and was a gentleman. Poor little Myra!—not that she was small; no, she was above the average height of women—but there was something so helpless in her uncomplaining resignation, something so touching in the circumstances of her innocent youth, that all the generous chivalry of Leyton's nature yearned to watch

over her and give light and warmth to her existence. Perhaps, had she been a plain, lumpy young person, his interest would have been less warm, less keen. Alas! for the innate injustice of human beings: but so it is.

Of course, Leyton was only actuated by pity, but—Myra was such a womanly creature, that whatever feeling she excited must be streaked with tenderness, especially in hearts like his. “At any rate,” was his concluding thought, as he turned back to his book, “she has done more to make me forget my own disgust of life, and to make me a live man once more, than anyone or anything. Poor old Dallas! If he could but see what an isolated waif his darling is now, I don’t think the angels above or the devils below would keep him back from revisiting this world again! But he ought to have made some provision for her—that’s the rub—the bar sinister *and* an empty pocket are too heavy odds for the strongest man; and for a tender, delicate girl! It’s too bad to think about.”

The time which intervened between the receipt of her invitation and Lady Shirland’s dinner seemed long indeed to Leyton. He did not carry out his

intention of calling on Mrs. Keene : he thought better of it. If she had seen Myra, and had anything to communicate, she would have done so. If she had nothing to tell, he had better not waste his time listening to her fears and absurd objections, which, somehow, found an echo in his own unreasoning fancies, and worried him more than he would have liked to confess.

The expected day, however, came at last.

Leyton's impatience brought him in good time to Lady Shirland's abode. He was the first to arrive, and was cordially welcomed, and immediately engaged in a discussion respecting an exhibition of his sketches by Miss Browne, a project in which she interested herself immensely. She had asked Mr. Bartlett, the great art critic, to meet him ; it was so useful to meet these people, and cultivate them, especially at a small dinner. They were rather fortunate in securing him, he was so run after, etc. etc.

Mrs. Dallas and suite were just in time and no more

While waiting for Lionel, who was a little late, Mrs. Dallas said rather suddenly, " Myra, my dear,

I want you to be as kind and sisterly to Lionel as you can this evening. He was not very well last night, and is depressed to-day. I want him to enjoy the evening. He has an uncommon nature, and needs kindness to keep him straight. You will help me with him, will you not?" She opened and shut her fan as she spoke; evidently she was anxious.

"Certainly, aunt! I will be as nice as I can; but is it not funny that I should have to comfort and sustain a young man of the world, and at my first dinner-party, too?"

"Under his circumstances, I think it is *not* remarkable, Myra," returned Mrs. Dallas with a frown. She resented any sally of this description from her niece: any thought or action uninspired by herself was open rebellion in her eyes. But Lionel appeared, and they started without further words.

Leyton watched the party enter with deep interest. First came Mrs. Dallas, stately and handsome in her widow's weeds; then Myra, her simple black dress made a little more suitable to the occasion by being opened in the front, and filled in with foamy white crêpe lisse frills. She showed no shyness,

no timidity; she was as softly composed as when she visited his studio; she looked graceful and refined. Her eyes sought him at once, and she gave him a slowly mantling blush of welcome; the colour remained and gave wonderful depth to the blue of her eyes. Young Ashby, however, was the member of the party to whom Leyton gave most attention. He was agreeably surprised by his look and air. Except that he was dark as a Spaniard, and his moustache was thin and fine, there was little indication of his mixed blood. He was slight, but well made, quiet and graceful in manner, had an engaging smile, and dazzlingly white teeth. "A deuced good-looking fellow!" thought Leyton.

Nothing could be more gently gracious than the greeting accorded by Mrs. Dallas to Myra's friend, and Myra herself, giving him her hand, said, with a sigh and a straight, half reproachful look, "It's so long since I saw you!"

"That is because you are never at home!" returned Leyton quickly.

Myra made no reply, and cast down her eyes, for Mrs. Dallas was standing close beside her; then dinner was announced. Mrs. Dallas was given to

Leyton, and Myra to his chum, Ardill. These four were at opposite sides of the table, and occasionally exchanged a word across it. Leyton was, therefore, able to observe the manners and bearing of the novice whose fortunes occupied so much of his thoughts.

There was, indeed, little of the novice about her. Her quiet simplicity, her evident freedom from any pre-occupation about self, had all the effect of high-bred composure. Nor did she seem to be at any loss for conversation. Whatever the topic Ardill seemed to have hit on, it was something that interested her; for she listened and looked and smiled in a way that evidently rewarded her cavalier for his efforts to amuse.

Miss Browne quite absorbed Lionel Ashby, and Lady Shirland had plenty to say to the art critic, who was to be fed and flattered, soothed and stimulated.

Mrs. Dallas selected Myra for her subject, and did not find it difficult to keep Leyton's attention fixed.

"I am very glad to have an opportunity of talking with you, my dear Mr. Leyton," she began.

"You have been so good to poor Myra! She has told me all about the sketching lessons you gave her, and your kindly calling upon her. She has had a miserably dull life; but I hope things look better for her. We are planning a little tour in France and Germany."

"Indeed! That will be a great joy for Myra, and rouse her up; though I must say she looks pounds better than when I saw her last."

"You think so? I am so glad!" said Mrs. Dallas with soft satisfaction. "You really must come to tea with us, and help me in making our plans. I know nothing of the Continent, except for a visit or two to Paris, coming to and fro from Marseilles; and my son, who knows France better, cannot accompany us. Later in the season he may join us; but business will keep him for the present in London."

"I shall be most happy to be of the slightest use; but I have not been on the Continent for some years. When shall I have the pleasure of calling?"

"Oh! Let me see. Next Sunday. Gentlemen are generally free on Sundays."

"Thank you. I shall be delighted."

"I am told, Mr. Leyton, you are going to exhibit your works. I hope you will have a great success. When will the exhibition be open, and where will it be?"

"Oh, at one of the small galleries in Pall Mall. I will give you due notice."

"I only hope we may be in town. We think of starting in about a fortnight or three weeks."

"A very pleasant time. Places are not so crowded as in the autumn," etc. etc. etc.

And talk flowed on in the ordinary channels of commonplace, till the ladies rose.

Leyton held the door open for them to pass out.

"Don't be too long," said Dorothea playfully, in a loud whisper; and then ran upstairs after Myra.

"That Dallas woman isn't half bad," thought Leyton, returning to his place. "She speaks fair enough. There's a look in the corner of her eye at times I don't quite like; but I am infernally prejudiced. Why should she not like a sweet young creature like Myra? It would be natural enough if

—that is to say—she has given up being charming and attractive herself; but I am not so sure about that.”

Then he addressed himself to Lionel Ashby, and tried to draw him out—not very successfully, for the young man seemed to retreat behind a rampart of reserve; so Leyton joined the battle which was raging between the critic and Ardill on some side issues of art, and which detained them longer than Miss Browne liked.

Meantime Lionel stole away; and when Leyton reached the drawing-room, he was leaning over a sofa where Dorothea and Myra were sitting together. The latter was looking up to him with a frank, kind expression, which seemed to Leyton as indicative of sympathy and mutual understanding, at sight of which he was conscious of an unreasoning and unpleasant rising of the gorge.

He was making his way to add a fourth to the trio, when Mrs. Dallas stopped him with some unimportant question about studios in Paris, and which would he recommend, should Myra wish to study there.

“For,” added Mrs. Dallas, “if she is really anxious

to be an artist, I should not oppose her; but I fear she is not strong enough for real hard work."

"Work strengthens if it is not overdone. I will send you or bring you the names of some. Indeed, I think of running over to Paris when I have started my 'show,' and might advise better on the spot."

While he spoke, Miss Browne and Myra rose and went to the piano. Lionel put up some music, while Myra seated herself and began an accompaniment. A duet ensued between Dorothea and Lionel, then a solo by the lady, during which Leyton stood a little behind them, fretting at the loss of precious time. The evening was slipping away, and he dreaded losing the rare chance of speaking to Myra.

At the end of the song Miss Browne exclaimed—

"Go on playing, dear—just anything. The sound of the piano makes the dulllest talk."

At the same time Lady Shirland called "Mr. Ashby!" in her pleasantly authoritative voice; so Lionel went. Miss Browne turned with a smile to Leyton; but, disregarding it, he went to the

piano, and leaning on the side of it, where he could see the young musician's face, said—

“I thought I was never to see you again, Myra. Mrs. Keene said you were not well. I find you are looking blooming.”

“I am quite well. I was only tired of having nothing to do when Mrs. Keene came. The idea of travelling is so delightful; then, perhaps, my aunt may stay in Paris and let me study painting.”

“She has just been speaking to me of it.”

“Has she?”—with eagerness. “Then she really means it?”

The phrase was eloquent of distrust to Leyton's ear. He looked intently into her eyes, so eagerly that Myra smiled.

“Are you happy?” asked Leyton, bending a little nearer, and almost in a whisper.

“I am—now,” she returned deliberately, her eyes sinking slowly on the notes.

There was an emphasis on “now” which did not escape his ear.

“I trust you will be happy always. I think of going to Paris for a little while. We may meet.”

"I do hope——"

Here Miss Browne interposed.

"You know," she said, in a familiar, caressing way, "you promised to advise me about the curtains for my boudoir;" and in spite of himself Leyton was carried off. When he returned Mrs. Dallas was standing as if in the act of leave-taking, while Myra and Lionel Ashby were talking together in a very friendly and intimate manner.

"I have stayed far later than I intended," Mrs. Dallas was saying. "But I have done well in coming. The delightful atmosphere of your pleasant house seems to have broken the spell which has hung over me. I hope to be quite myself when we return."

"Doesn't that crusty old critic give you the idea of an English 'Pooh-Bah'?" said Lionel to Myra.

"Yes, quite." She smiled, and turned her eyes appreciatively to his. Whatever his said, it brought the quick colour to her cheeks and made the lids droop over her eyes, while she slightly shrank away.

The next moment they were saying good-

night. As she passed through the door, Myra turned and gave a last look at Leyton—a look that dwelt long with him. Up to that moment he had almost believed that all was well with her, but in that look there was a sudden revelation of fear, despondency, and farewell.

“It’s not all right,” was his prompt comment. “It will go hard but I shall manage a talk with her on Sunday.”

CHAPTER XV.

MYSTERIOUS PROCEEDINGS.

BUT Leyton never had the chance.

The day after Lady Shirland's dinner Mrs. Dallas developed a bad chill. She shivered, she burned, her head swam, her back ached, she was faint, she had palpitation of the heart; she sent for the doctor, and the doctor sent her to bed.

She really had a cold, but she may possibly have improved the symptoms. Myra was the most attentive nurse possible. Myra was a born nurse: she was so sympathetic that she divined the sufferer's wants.

Lionel, too, was profoundly anxious about his mother; so much so that he constantly got away from his business at extraordinarily early hours and passed the greater part of his day in the house. Consequently Myra spent most of hers in the sick-room.

Mrs. Dallas was very silent, but also very restless. Myra did not like to question her, but she wondered to herself if Jack Leyton would call on Sunday and if she should have to see him in the drawing-room alone.

Sunday passed, however, and he never came. On Monday, late in the day, he did, and asked for Miss Dallas; but on descending to the dining-room she found him standing on the hearthrug and conversing with Lionel, so their short conversation was confined to the merest commonplaces.

He called again and again, only to meet Lionel. So nearly three weeks passed, and Mrs. Dallas was convalescent.

The third or fourth evening after she had come downstairs, and was lying back in an easy chair wrapped in one of her beautiful Indian shawls, she complained of cold, and begged Myra to put on more coal.

The scuttle was empty, and Myra, with her usual readiness to save trouble, ran to the top of the kitchen stairs and asked for a fresh supply. In a few minutes Mrs. Dwyer herself appeared with a shovelful.

"Very sorry you've had to call, 'm. I've just sent Jane to the greengrocer's; she shall fill the scuttle as soon as she comes in. This will just keep the fire going."

She made it up, swept the hearth, and taking the scuttle to depart, stopped to inquire how Mrs. Dallas felt herself. That lady scarcely replied. Myra was sitting at the opposite side of the work-table, with her back to the windows, waiting to resume the reading aloud which Mrs. Dwyer's entrance had interrupted. As that worthy woman passed close by Myra on her way to the door, she exclaimed, "Dear, dear, that girl is terrible careless! She can't have swept the room this morning, for here's a big piece of flue." She paused, stooped to pick up something and throw it in the scuttle as she spoke, and then proceeded on her way, leaving, half under the hem of Myra's skirt, a note.

Myra, warned by a glance, perceived the manœuvre. With a beating heart, and an odd sense of guilt and shame, she remained quite still, her cheeks glowing.

She must not betray Mrs. Dwyer, at any rate!

but for herself she had nothing to conceal. If Mrs. Dallas ever discovered any underhand dealing on her part, why the world would come to an end! It would be too shameful to deceive her aunt, unless, indeed, she backed up Lionel too strongly; and Lionel had been making her feel rather uneasy of late. Yes, she must take that note and read it. Heavens! how thankful she was that her aunt's eyes were closed.

It seemed suddenly revealed to her, that under her sincere gratitude, her admiration, her doubts, lay a deeply rooted, though unaccountable fear of Mrs. Dallas.

"Are you not going to read?" asked that lady languidly. "You might put me off to sleep; and I had a wretched night."

"Oh, yes! I will," said Myra quickly, and reaching down her hand, as if to draw her skirt closer about her, she secured the note, and slipped it into her pocket.

Then she began to read, but her voice was unsteady for the first few sentences; then, as Mrs. Dallas lay quite still, she gradually recovered herself, and, as the moments flew by, eager curiosity replaced

her fears. The time seemed long, indeed, till soon after dinner. When her aunt retired at last, Myra, having carefully attended to all her patient's wants, escaped to her own room, and, locking the door, opened her letter.

It was addressed to her. Glancing at the signature, she saw the name, "J. Leyton," and, with a sudden sense of delight, she read—

"DEAR MYRA,—I hope you will get this ; I have written twice before in vain, so pray answer ! I hope you are not quite worn out by your attendance on your aunt. Is all well with you ? I write chiefly to tell you that I start on Tuesday for Paris, and, after, for Brussels. My address at the former place will be 23, Rue du Marché, St. Honoré ; at Brussels, '*poste restante*.' Don't fail to write if you want me. I shall be away a month. Let me know your whereabouts, for I should like to be your cicerone in the queen of cities. When shall you start ? Ever your friend,—J. LEYTON."

He was going in three days—only three days !—and he would be out of reach ! She had no certain information of any kind to give him ! She must write, just to thank him ; but she had no stamp, no envelope, not a penny to buy one ! She would—yes, she would dare to steal an envelope from her

aunt's well-filled stationery case; and she had a sheet of note-paper and a pencil in her room. Mrs. Dwyer would post it for her, if she could reach her unperceived. How keenly she felt that she was watched at every turn! it was borne in upon her. She was tired of saying she wanted to go and see Mrs. Fairchild, the visit was always put off. She seemed to be hedged in with invisible fencing, she could not take a single step alone. The present moment, at least, was hers; she, therefore, took her only sheet of paper, and wrote as clearly as she could with an indifferent pencil—

“How good of you to write! I have had only one note from you. I am well, but always a little tired. My aunt is better; I do not know when she intends to start. She is kind, but—I wish I could work for myself. I have no stamp; pray forgive an unstamped letter. Do *not* write again, unless you hear from me. Always your attached old ‘young’ friend,—MYRA.”

She wanted to say much more, but she feared to attempt it, time might fail her! She wished to be prepared for Mrs. Dwyer, who would, she felt sure, make some attempt to communicate with her. She wrote Leyton's address at the end of her

note and then tore up his letter into the smallest fragments, and put them with her note under her pillow.

It was long before she went to sleep. Her brain was working too actively! A hundred tiny voices seemed to tell her in whispers which were more distinct than the loudest trumpet call that her present life could not go on, or she would become an idiot. The perpetual sense of being surrounded by something vague, impalpable, yet constraining, kept her in a constant condition of apprehension and uneasiness. Yet there was nothing of which she had a right to complain.

Then she dreaded Lionel in a stupid, unreasonable way. In spite of his self-restraint and precaution, she felt that he had not relinquished his determination to marry her, and she also felt convinced that Mrs. Dallas would do her utmost to gratify her idolised son, and this frightened her still more.

"I am weak and foolish," she said to herself. "Why should they hurt me? If Lionel troubles me any more I shall try to get away. I shall earn my bread somehow. I shall go with my aunt abroad. It may be rather pleasant without Lionel;

but when I return I *will* arrange my life my own way. Jack will help me, even though he *is* married to Miss Browne."

Comforted by this resolution, Myra at length fell asleep. She seemed to herself to be awakened almost immediately by hearing her blind drawn up. She opened her eyes, and beheld Mrs. Dwyer herself covering her hot-water can with the folded towel.

"Hush!" said Mrs. Dwyer softly, seeing her eyes were open. "I came myself, for I thought may-be you'd have an answer to that letter."

"Thank you—oh, thank you!" whispered Myra, as the suspicious landlady crept over to her noiselessly. "I have no envelope; but here is the note, and the address is here."

"Will you trust it to me, miss, to put in an envelope and direct?"

"Yes—gladly," raising herself and drawing the note from under her pillow. "And these pieces—take them too."

"Lord's sake, miss, let me see that there are no more lying about!" and Mrs. Dwyer rummaged under the bolster and peeped beneath the bed.

"It's all right," she whispered. "I'll post it myself."

"I have no stamp," murmured Myra.

"Never mind. Let him see you haven't," returned Mrs. Dwyer, scanning the address. "I must go. I'll call Mrs. Dallas too, because the 'gurl' has been obliged to fetch fresh butter;" and with a solemn nod she disappeared.

Myra rose, a curious mixture of feelings contending in her heart—joy that her note was safely despatched; irritation and self-contempt at being driven to such underhand proceedings.

This uncomfortable sense of frayed self-esteem pursued her at breakfast and spoiled her repast.

"You don't eat, Myra," said Mrs. Dallas, "and you look as if you had not slept. Are you not well, my dear?"

"Yes, thank you—quite well. I had bad dreams—that is all."

"Bad dreams are very bad," put in Lionel. "I think the sooner you get off, mother, the better. Both Myra and yourself evidently want change."

"You are right, Lionel. I do not see why we should not get off at the end of next week. I should

like a month at Cannes to begin with; then the spring will be advanced, and we might travel a little in Germany."

There was some talk about Cook's tickets and other details of journeying, which cheered Myra greatly. Movement of any kind was a kind of emancipation.

From this time Mrs. Dallas began to make her preparations. She was physically quite herself, but more silent and thoughtful than usual—thoughtful in a sombre manner—sitting long with knitted brows, as if brooding over unpleasant memories or anticipations.

Matters progressed in the usual way. There was much shopping and laying-in of various things which they could get just as well, if a little dearer, in the towns they visited. Myra proved herself of use in many ways, and the days went merrily.

If they might only pause for a few days at Paris! But she dared not suggest it.

Lady Shirland, though deeply immersed in the social whirl of the season, invited Mrs. Dallas and her niece to luncheon, whereat Myra heard more of her aunt's plans than she had yet

known. Miss Browne was both sympathetic and enthusiastic.

“How I envy you this first experience of continental travel!” she said to Myra. “Of course, you lived in Germany in your childhood; but that did not mean travelling. And I am sure you will have delightful *compagnons de voyage* in Mrs. Dallas and Mr. Ashby.”

“My son will not join us for some time. Then he will pick us up at Dijon; and we will go into Switzerland together. He will be very useful. He was at school in France in his early boyhood, and speaks French very well.”

“Then you will go on to Geneva? How charming! Shall you make any stay in Paris?”

“I do not think so—perhaps returning. But I think of remaining abroad for four or five months, Lady Shirland,” said Mrs. Dallas.

“Oh, indeed! Well, let me know when you make a halt anywhere, and I shall give you introductions. We know a good many people here and there on the Continent.”

“Mr. Leyton is in Paris now. I should think he would be a charming cicerone,” said Dorothea.

"No doubt; but we shall only pass through at present."

"Well, do keep us *au courant*," added Lady Shirland. "Send me a line now and then."

"And will you write to *me*?" said Dorothea affectionately to Myra.

Then there was a very affectionate leave-taking, and cordial wishes for a *bon voyage*.

The day but one after, Mrs. Dallas went into town early after luncheon to settle some business, leaving Myra to do various matters—to select books from the bookcase in the drawing-room; to fold and put away their winter dresses, and make a list of sundries to be left behind.

She was busy over the books when Lionel came in, and taking his place before the fire, which Mrs. Dallas could not dispense with, observed—

"Very busy, Myra?"

"Yes; there is really a great deal to do before we can move. Are you not free very early nowadays?" looking at the clock.

"You see, I am so valuable at the office that they favour me a little," he returned.

"I should imagine that if you are valuable you could be ill spared."

"You are growing quite sharp, Myra."

Myra did not answer, but continued kneeling before the dwarf bookcase and taking out a book here and there.

"I shall be very miserable, Myra, when you and my mother are gone," said Lionel.

"Yes; I am afraid you will," returned Myra kindly. She rose from her lowly position, and stood trying to wipe off the dust from her fingers with the duster she held. "But you must go and see Miss Browne often. She sent you some very kind messages, which I forget. They are going to have a number of parties, and——"

"Do you think any Miss Browne, any parties, would make up to me for *you*? You can't picture to yourself how *I* shall feel when you are gone—even for a short time."

"Lionel, you promised not to talk in this strain any more."

"I do not care what I promised. I cannot be silent. Have you still the same dislike to me, Myra?"

"I do not dislike you. I should like you well enough if you were really my brother."

"I should cut my throat if I were. Myra, before you leave me I want you to understand that nothing you can say or do will turn me from my determination to marry you; and, mind, my mother will help me."

"But, Lionel, how can you wish to marry a girl that does not love you—I mean in that way?"

"I don't care whether you do or not. I *want* you. If you were my own I would teach you to love me. I would——"

He stopped abruptly.

"Oh, Lionel, can love be taught?"

"How do you know? What put that question into your head?" he cried almost fiercely.

"I do not know. Nature, perhaps."

"If I were your husband you would learn to love me."

"If you were my husband," said Myra, something of resolution and repulsion bursting into sudden glowing life within her, "I should hate you! Do not dream of what is impossible."

“And you—— Be warned—do not defy me! What are you—what have you—that you reject *all* I can offer?”

“I am myself,” said Myra quietly, “and I shall do what I think best. Do not force me to speak to you unkindly. I would rather not.”

She spoke with firm calmness, looking straight into his burning eyes. He stood still, as if arrested by her manner; and, turning from him, she left the room, saying—

“I have a good deal to do for my aunt.”

They did not meet again till dinner-time the following day; but Myra felt sure Lionel had repeated their conversation to his mother. She was very still and cold—it seemed an effort to her to attend to her preparations—and the slight exhilaration which the prospect of their journey had given to Myra quickly evaporated before a chill, undefined sense of danger.

They were now within four days of that fixed for their start. It was soon after breakfast; Myra was busy in the dining-room wrapping up some ornaments to be left behind, when Mrs. Dwyer came in with a parcel and a bill.

"Where is Mrs. Dallas, miss?"

"In her room, I think."

Mrs. Dwyer advanced nearer, having set the door wide open, and, standing where she could see the stairs, said in a low tone—

"So you are going, miss? Ah! I *am* sorry."

"Why?" said Myra, startled.

"I do not know. Only it comes over me that you would be better here."

"Oh, Mrs. Dwyer," whispered Myra with an impulse of confidence, "I am quite miserable! When I came in here this morning to breakfast Mrs. Dallas was alone with Mr. Ashby; and I heard her say, in such a cruel voice, 'She shall have *no* choice!' What *could* she mean? Did she mean me?"

"I daresay. She is a devil; so is the son. He has been put out of the office—*that* is why he comes home so early. I wish you weren't going with him."

"He is not coming with us."

"Don't you be too sure," with an upward toss of the chin, expressive of the most utter disbelief.

“He may join us later, but——”

“Just so,” interrupted Mrs. Dwyer hastily. “I’ll try and find out what they are after. I’ve caught a word or two, and I must hear more. I always suspected——” Here she suddenly raised her voice, and, in a totally different key, added, “I’ll go on to her room, miss; for the boy is waiting for his money.”

“What do you want, Mrs. Dwyer?” asked Mrs. Dallas, coming in.

“A parcel from Jay’s, ’m. One pound thirteen and six to pay.”

“Myra, my dear, will you bring me my purse? I left it on my dressing-table.”

Myra obeyed; and Mrs. Dallas continued to speak with Mrs. Dwyer about her arrangements.

“Were those ladies who called yesterday afternoon looking at the rooms upstairs?”

“Yes, ’m.”

“Did you come to terms?”

“No, ’m; they thought the rent too high.”

“It is foolish to hold out for too high a rent, Mrs. Dwyer. A few weeks ‘unlet’ would be a greater loss than a comparatively small price.”

"May-be so, 'm. But I am thinking I should like a rest; and I might wait till Mr. Ashby goes, and let all the rooms except the one you keep. When will he leave, 'm?"

"Well, I have taken these rooms for a month. He may leave a little before, but he'll certainly not stay longer."

As she spoke Mrs. Dallas slowly raised her eyes and fastened them on her interlocutor's with "a sort of a searchingness," Mrs. Dwyer afterwards described, "that might make a stouter woman than me shake in her shoes." Here Myra returned with the purse, and Mrs. Dallas counted out the money.

"There," she said, "be sure you make the messenger receipt the bill; and remember, Mrs. Dwyer, I do not re-enter on my tenancy of these rooms till the fifteenth of August."

"Very well, 'm;" and Mrs. Dwyer disappeared.

"Till August!" exclaimed Myra. "That will be a nice long time; we can see many places in that time." She felt somehow comforted by the idea, for Mrs. Dallas would never let Lionel rest

in idleness all those months. Even if it were true that he had lost his employment, he must seek another.

“You would like to live abroad, then, Myra?”

“I do not care much where I live, but you know I never had any *home* in England.”

“Do you not feel at home with *me*, Myra?” asked Mrs. Dallas, with a somewhat constrained smile.

“I should do so, aunt,” returned Myra, colouring, but speaking steadily, “if I could earn even a little for myself, so as not to be obliged to ask you for money. When you do so much for me——”

“And how do you propose to earn money, Myra?”

“I could give German lessons, and——”

“Put it out of your head for the present. When we return—but no one knows what may happen in three or four months, nor do I care much. It is my lot to be disappointed. Go, my dear; put on your hat. I want to do a little shopping—the last before we go, I hope, for money is just running away like water.”

Myra went away to her room struck with some self-reproach by her aunt's tone: it was bitter and hard. "I am mistaken, and she really likes me. I must seem very unkind," she thought. "I wish, I do wish I had not told Mrs. Dwyer I had heard her say, 'She shall have *no* choice.' I did not seem able to keep back the words. However, we shall soon be free of Lionel, at least for a whole month; that will be *something*."

It seemed a confirmation of Mrs. Dwyer's news that the whole of the next morning Lionel was in and out doing various errands for his mother. He did not, however, dine with them, and as Mrs. Dallas seemed much occupied with her writing, Myra went away early to her own room.

Saturday—the day fixed for their departure—was now close at hand, and Myra began to count the hours which intervened. She thought that Mrs. Dallas kept her rather closely at her side, but she told herself that this must be a morbid fancy which would vanish once she was across the Channel, away from London and its trammels.

Lionel had been cold and distant since his last rebuff. Once or twice she caught a glance

from his dark eyes, expressive both of hatred and of admiration, which raised a quick sense of dread in her heart. "I am growing a hopeless coward," she thought.

On Wednesday afternoon, returning with Mrs. Dallas, who had been going round to pay her trades-people finally, the door did not open to the application of her latch-key.

"Some more of their stupid cleaning," said Mrs. Dallas, as she rang the bell impatiently. She was not kept waiting, for Mrs. Dwyer opened to them almost immediately.

"I'm sure I don't know how it happened," said the landlady apologetically.

Mrs. Dallas swept past her without a word. Then, to Myra's amazement, Mrs. Dwyer, with a warning glance, thrust a small folded piece of paper into her hand, which closed mechanically upon it.

"Come here, Myra," called Mrs. Dallas as she entered the dining-room. It was only to give her a small parcel to carry upstairs. Myra complied willingly, and then went on to her own room, where she ventured to read the scrap of

paper given her by Mrs. Dwyer. It opened up much larger than she expected, and was scrawled over in a large hand :—

“I have something to tell you. Don’t lock your door to-night; don’t be frightened if I come in; try to keep awake. Destroy this—”

an injunction immediately obeyed by tearing it into infinitesimal morsels and throwing them from the window.

What could Mrs. Dwyer have to say?—what could she have found out? Might she not be actuated by her evident dislike to Mrs. Dallas and her son? Myra’s heart beat violently; she trembled from head to foot. She tried for some minutes in vain to compose herself. She was so awfully alone in the wide, terrible world, without one friend on earth but dear, kind Mrs. Keene, and what was she to be pitted against the cruel determination of Mrs. Dallas? Why—why did her uncle’s widow keep such a firm grip of her poor, insignificant self?

“I will *not* lose my head with foolish fright,” said Myra to herself. “I *will* try and keep cool

and quiet, or they will suspect something, and I must—oh, I must!—hear what Mrs. Dwyer has to say!”

She removed her hat, and, going to the glass, was shocked at the reflection of her pale cheeks and terrified eyes. She took a rough towel and rubbed her face to create a little colour. Then she arranged her hair and dress, and pausing to recover the wild beating of her heart, found herself better able to face Mrs. Dallas.

Never did the terrible recollection of that evening fade from her. Fortunately it was near dinner time, and Mrs. Dallas was occupied with her favourite literature—the newspaper, so Myra was free to sit silent with her knitting, while her thoughts flew far and wide: first there was the intense curiosity to know what Mrs. Dwyer could possibly have to tell; then the vague but poignant dread of evil—of she knew not what; then tormenting doubts of her own sound judgment in listening to the suggestions, either of her own fears, or of Mrs. Dwyer’s prejudices. Suppose she refused to go away with Mrs. Dallas; what was she to do? People would think her mad, except, perhaps, Mrs. Keene, and she could not be

a burden on *her*. Finally, she had not a penny in the world! What was to become of her? she could form no idea until the promised conference with Mrs. Dwyer.

Meantime Lionel came in; dinner was served and eaten in nearly complete silence. In the evening Mrs. Dallas made some attempts at conversation, which Myra, almost to her own surprise, seconded nobly. Towards the end all grew more lively and talkative over Bradshaw, and the maps, and at last—at last, Myra felt she might say “Good-night.”

“Good-night,” returned Mrs. Dallas, “only two more nights before we leave England for the continental paradise of which you dream, Myra!”

“That is saying too much, aunt,” she returned. “Good-night, Lionel.” He rose and opened the door for her. “Good-night to *you*,” he said as she passed, “though you have murdered sleep for me!”

It was better when she was alone—at least, she had no need to guard her face—she could relieve her restlessness by walking softly to and fro. She locked her door as usual and put out her candle.

It was a fine moonlit night, and she sat still and silent before undressing, till she heard her aunt come up and go into her room; then the landing gas was put out, the glimmer through her keyhole vanished; then she partly undressed, unlocked her door, and lay down.

CHAPTER XVI

A BOLD STROKE.

THE moments dropped slowly into the abyss of past time as if double-leaded, while Myra lay awake and watching. A distant clock chimed one, and still she listened with quick-beating pulses to the profound stillness.

At last, though there was no sound, she saw, in the dim moonlight which made things visible, her door open, and a figure she scarcely recognised enter. But it *was* Mrs. Dwyer, in a long grey and black wrapper and a black shawl, all her iron-grey hair being scraped up into a knot on the top of her head, making her long, bony face look many times older, sterner, and more weird. Without a word she closed the door and turned the key. Then coming close to the bed, she whispered, "I oiled them well, both hinge and lock, yesterday! Now listen, we are safe for a bit! After you went up to bed last night—

that is, Tuesday night, I let my young gentleman in, and bad he looked! He says, 'Where's my mother?'

"'In the drawing-room,' says I; and up he went, stopping when he had got a few steps to ask for some seltzer-water. So I took it up myself.

"They were talking hard by the time I got to the drawing-room, and looking as black as thunder. I set down the tray, with the glasses and seltzer *and* the brandy. Mrs. Dallas never said, 'Thank you!' she always treats you like dirt! I just mentioned the girl was out; all she said was, 'Draw the curtains'—so I did; but I saw that one of the windows was a wee bit open. It was a still night, and I just left it as it was; then I came out, and sees that the landing window was ajar, too; and some angel put it into my head to go round by the balcony to the room again, and listen. I propped the landing window open, and just slipped back behind the curtains. *She* was speaking. 'We must settle everything now,' she says very determined, 'for I'll never commit myself on paper about such a plan; but, if you obey me, it can't fail.' Then she went on, hard and clear. He is to meet you at Lyons not

later than the 10th (that's only three weeks off!), and you are to travel to another place; and there something is to go wrong—she is to go on one way, and you are to be left alone with the son to go another. Then she says you'll be glad enough to marry him because of scandal, or some such thing; and she is to seem ignorant, and say you had eloped with her son unknown to her. At the end she says very bitter and cruel, 'I can't bear any more of her insolent nonsense. We have lost too much precious time. All must be done before November term begins!' With that, young Ashby got up saying pretty loud, 'It's an admirably devilish plot!' and began to pace the room, and his mother said, 'Hush!' So I slipped out, and fastened up the landing window pretty carefully. Now, Miss Dallas, whatever you do, don't go away out of the country with them!"

This extraordinary revelation was uttered rapidly, in a low, impressive whisper, suggestive of murder and conspiracy.

"You really heard all this?" murmured Myra, even more bewildered than frightened. "My own aunt would betray me! It is almost incredible."

"It's as true as that the moon is shining up

there; and she is in terrible earnest. What's the reason she wants you so bad for her son?"

"I *cannot* tell, Mrs. Dwyer."

"Don't go with her, any way. She has a soft tongue. She might make you out a lunatic, or God knows what, when she had you away from the country."

"What can I do? Where can I go?" whispered Myra, grasping Mrs. Dwyer's hand in both her own and drawing her closer. "My head turns; I do not seem able to think." She stopped a moment, and then began again more calmly. "But I *will* escape! What you tell me seems true—it seems to realise all the vague doubts and forebodings I have had—and I dread Lionel so much! What shall I do?"

"You might go to Mrs. Keene for a bit, and get advice from that gentleman, Mr. Leyton, as called here so often. Haven't you no relations but Mrs. Dallas?"

"I never knew any but Uncle Edward," returned Myra, still clinging to her hand and speaking in a frightened whisper. "Mrs. Dallas is no relation."

"Then, I suppose, she could not force you to come back. Could you ask that grand lady—Lady Shirland—to help you?"

"She would never believe anything against Mrs. Dallas. No; I will go to Mrs. Keene, and, when he comes back, Mr. Leyton will advise me. Oh! I cannot bear to trouble him."

"But you can't afford to stand on ceremony, miss. You get away at all costs. You can't keep hidden long; but you'll have time to look about you. Will you risk it?"

"I will," said Myra, letting Mrs. Dwyer's hand go, and slipping out of bed to sit on the side of it when she had brought her only chair for her "nocturnal visitor." "But, you know, I have not one penny."

"I guessed that, miss. I'll lend you a few shillings, and Mrs. Keene can dispose of the ring. You have kept it out of sight, I hope?"

"Yes; I have it quite safe."

"How you will get away is the thing," resumed Mrs. Dwyer. "You must just watch your chance. She will be going out, for sure. You must just fly the minute her back is turned; and mind you

make for Salisbury Avenue—it is the wide road at the end on the left, and turn left—the 'buses to the Addison Road Station cross it; or you might find a cab—it's only a shilling fare. Don't, any way, go by Earl's Court—you might run into her arms. Then you can get on to the Portland Road Station, quite near Mrs. Keene's place. Now, can you understand all this?"

"Yes; and I will do it. If I have not courage now, I shall be a slave for life. Since you have taken all this trouble for me, you shall see I am not unworthy of it."

"And you will never let out that I listened and warned you?"

"Never, Mrs. Dwyer—never!"

"Well, now we'd better finish the business. Give me a few of your things to put up for you to take away. You can choose them by this blessed moonlight. I'll make a neat little parcel and address it to myself—I've an old label of Barker's—then it can lie on the hall table, and be ready for you to snatch up as you pass by. Remember, the minute she goes out you put on your hat and cloak and fly. Be sure you turn left. I wish I had brought

my purse; but I locked it away downstairs as usual. Now, that's about all you'd better take, or it will make too big a packet;" and Mrs. Dwyer, who was quite pleasurablely excited at the idea of outwitting Mrs. Dallas, gathered up the change of raiment selected by Myra.

"Will you take care of the only two treasures I have in the world?" asked Myra unsteadily. "These two pictures. I cannot take them with me."

"Give 'em to me, and wild horses shan't drag them out of me," said Mrs. Dwyer in an energetic whisper. "Hush!" she exclaimed. "Did you hear a foot outside?"

"No!" returned Myra, trembling and clinging to her.

"Be quite quiet."

A few dreadful moments passed; but all was silent.

"I don't think it was anything," said Mrs. Dwyer with a sigh of relief; "but I had better go."

"Oh, if you could only stay with me!" murmured Myra. "It is too terrible to be here alone!"

"Keep up your heart! You'll be all right if you can only get away. Mind you look cheerful and ready to go to the ends of the earth with her when you meet Mrs. Dallas to-morrow."

Mrs. Dwyer opened the door slowly and with the utmost precaution. It was very dark on the landing, but she knew her way.

"Thank you for your great goodness to me," murmured Myra in a low tone, embracing her.

"God bless you, dear! Mind you don't let yourself be frightened—everything depends on that. Try to get a wink or two of sleep."

The gaunt, hard-looking woman spoke quite tenderly. Then she passed out noiselessly, as she had entered.

Myra carefully locked the door, and sought additional safety by burying her head under the bed-clothes.

It was an awful prospect—on either hand difficulty and danger. To risk trusting herself with her aunt away abroad, out of reach of Mrs. Keene or Jack Leyton, was not to be thought of; to escape and defy her entailed a fight for freedom. She had no plausible reason that she could

avow to justify her act ; for she must never betray Mrs. Dwyer.

Poor Myra's religious education had been sorely neglected, as may be imagined ; but like all young creatures gifted with heart and mind, her natural instinct in moments of difficulty was to turn for help to the Author of all Good. A few moments of tearful, wordless prayer helped her to compose herself, and confirmed her in her resolution to risk all and fly—next day or the one following, as opportunity offered. She felt calmer and stronger, but sleep refused to visit a brain so troubled ; she thought and planned, and saw visions of the future more or less sombre, yet not altogether unstreaked by lines of light, till dawn stole in at her window, and warned her that the moment for action was approaching.

She had, however, schooled herself so well during her long self-communing, that she presented a cheerful, composed aspect at breakfast, and that meal passed over as usual. Indeed, Mrs. Dallas was unusually agreeable and talkative. Lionel was in no hurry to go out. He sat and read the newspaper till Mrs. Dallas had finished some notes,

and a list of commissions to be executed before luncheon.

"There, Lionel," she said at last, "it will save me very much if you will do all this." Lionel came over and took the list from her. "Yes, of course, I'll be your agent," he said; "can't I go to the bank for you, too?"

"No, thank you, dear. I must go there myself in the afternoon to settle a few matters, and I shall call at the vicarage as I return. Shall you return to luncheon?"

"Well, no, I do not think I can manage all this in time, but I shall not be long after." He left the room, and presently returned in outdoor toilette, and having received a few further instructions from his mother, departed.

What a terrible morning it was! Myra was dizzy with anxiety and dread. What would be her fate if her attempted escape was discovered and baffled? She felt without any effort at reasoning that both mother and son would exact a cruel revenge. She went mechanically about all her aunt told her to do, while her tongue felt parched. There was a terrible moment when Mrs. Dallas said—

"Myra, I wish you would bring all your clothes down to my room. I will share one of my large boxes with you instead of using your small one. I hope, dear, your ring is safe! You had better bring it too, and let me put it up with my jewels; I am going to take a few with me!"

"Very well, aunt," returned Myra, forced into an unusual degree of duplicity.

"I shall pack your things as soon as I come in this afternoon, so have them all ready, and then we shall soon get through it."

"Thank you, aunt."

"You are looking woefully pale and miserable, Myra! What is the matter? are you nervous about our journey?"

"I believe I am!"

"Nonsense! take another glass of wine. Now I must go out, or I shall be late for the bank."

These sentences were exchanged at luncheon. The decisive moment was at hand. Mrs. Dallas, carefully arrayed as usual, sallied through the hall, and noticed a brown paper parcel lying on a chair. "Hum, our good Mrs. Dwyer has been indulging in finery at Barker's, I see," she said, and passed out

through the door Myra held open for her. That remark seemed to raise her courage. So much of Mrs. Dwyer's plan was successful, perhaps the rest would go well, too. She flew upstairs to put on hat and cloak, ringing to give notice to Mrs. Dwyer, hoping to meet her in the hall.

As she descended the stairs, her gloves in her hand, she beheld Mrs. Dwyer, indeed—but Mrs. Dwyer speaking to Lionel, who had just admitted himself with the latch-key. He was facing the stairs, he saw her; it was hopeless to evade him! A despairing glance from Mrs. Dwyer seemed to fire her with sudden desperate courage, to sharpen her wits and rouse her invention.

“Going out?” asked Lionel with some surprise, as she advanced towards him.

“Yes,” returned Myra with a coolness that astonished herself. “I am going to change some wools my aunt bought yesterday at Brown’s,” naming a fancy shop in Earl’s Court; “she said if you were back, perhaps you would come with me.”

“Yes, of course, with pleasure,” returned Lionel readily, and following her into the dining-room.

Myra continued putting on her gloves, and think-

ing what she should do next. Then she looked in the drawer of a work-table, and in a work-bag apparently in vain. "I must have left them in my aunt's room," she exclaimed; "I am always giving myself trouble by my forgetfulness," and she left the room. Lionel, who never stood when he could sit, had at once dropped into a rocking chair, near the fire-place, and behind the open door. There he lounged for a minute or two, feeling pleased by Myra's increased cordiality of manner, when the front door shut with a violent slam. In a second Lionel was on his feet, had snatched up his hat and was in the street—a quick conviction piercing through him that Myra had given him the slip. He was right. His keen eyes at once detected her running rapidly, and already almost at the corner of the street where it joined Salisbury Avenue. She looked back before she turned it, no doubt to see if she were followed. He had already started in pursuit at the top of his speed, and he could run fast.

Melford Road was little frequented, and at that moment there was no one else in sight. He was close upon her heels; in a minute more he would capture her, and then—but he did not stop

to reason. He was round the corner; a long length of road lay right and left of him, quite clear of passengers save a baker's boy with a basket on his arm, who was whistling as he came along, and a stout, elderly lady, both coming up from the direction in which Myra had run. He asked the boy, who met him first, if he had seen a young lady. No, the youth had seen "ne'er a one." A few yards further on a narrow street on the opposite side of the road branched off to the north. Fool that he was! of course she had turned down it. What a pace she must have gone! It couldn't last; he would soon come up with her. There were few cabs about and she must be penniless; his mother took good care of that. These thoughts sustained him as he tore along, on and on, in vain. No sign of the quarry. Suddenly he stopped. It was impossible she could have gone so far at such a rate, and the street he was in had no side openings, nor had he met a cab or seen even the back of one. Had she taken refuge in a house? If so, in which, and what friend had she to plot with? Had she escaped him?—had she escaped his clever,

resolute mother? How were they to recover her?—what excuse could they make?—what excuse could she make? Would it be excuse enough for putting her in a lunatic asylum? He ground his sharp, white teeth with fury at the idea of this simple girl, whom he and his mother looked upon as their lawful prey, outwitting and out-manceuvring him. He did not venture to stir a step without his mother, and she might not return for another hour.

Crestfallen, a hell of baffled wickedness raging in his soul, he walked back to Melford Road, streaming at every pore. After a few moments' pause to recover and cool himself, he rang and asked for Mrs. Dwyer.

"Did you know Miss Dallas had gone out?" he said.

"Yes, sir"—stolidly. "I heard her ask you to go with her, and then you slammed the door in a way——"

"D—n the door!" interrupted young Ashby rudely. "Somehow I have missed her, and it is too provoking."

"Where was she going, sir?"—innocently.

"Oh, to some shop, about wool for my mother."

"That will be Fisher's, sir. Well, she won't be long, unless, indeed, she goes on to Miss Browne."

Here was an infernal suggestion! And yet, would Lady Shirland or Dorothea believe a word against his mother or himself? No.

"Well she may," he said, remembering he had better keep things quiet. After all, Myra had nothing—nothing whatever—to complain of, and he himself would come out well as a fine, generous young fellow ready to marry a penniless girl with the bar sinister on her scutcheon into the bargain, by Jove! Still, it was the devil's own business.

"Do you want anything more, sir?" asked Mrs. Dwyer demurely.

"No—yes, some brandy and soda. I'll wait till Miss Dallas comes back."

"Very well, sir"—turning to leave the room.

"And a long wait you'll have. The poor, dear young lady is the right sort after all. She'll get out of their clutches now. She did him nicely. If I could only have given her a few shillings!"

Descending to her own territories, Mrs. Dwyer despatched "the gurl" with the desired refreshment, and then sat down to enjoy an unusually large crop of horrors in *Lloyd's Weekly* with the proud feeling that she was herself engaged in the working out of a plot in no way below those of the popular newspaper in interest.

It was, indeed, a bad half-hour spent by Lionel Ashby while waiting for his mother's return. In a way he dominated her, and on the other hand he feared her. To gain comfort and courage, he helped himself to brandy pure and simple when the soda-water was exhausted.

"It was nearly four o'clock when she came in; it had been about half-past two when he had returned from his ineffectual chase.

Mrs. Dallas was going straight upstairs to the drawing-room when "the gurl" said, "If you please, 'm, Mr. Ashby is in the dining-room." She turned in there, and seeing him lounging in his favourite rocking-chair, began with good-humoured playfulness, "You lazy boy——"

He interrupted her by starting up and closing the door carefully; then, facing her with pale

cheeks and wide-opened eyes, he said in a low, hoarse voice—

“Mother, she is gone; she has run away!”

“Myra!” she returned, letting the parcel she held drop. “Impossible! How?—where?—when?”

Lionel replied by detailing the particulars of Myra’s escape, and a very accurate account he gave. It was of too vital importance to suppress or exaggerate any detail.

“You were an idiot to let her out of your sight,” was her fierce comment.

“I did not think I had. She asked me to go out with her, and——”

“That of itself ought to have raised your suspicions. You have gone near to ruin all my plans—all my carefully-arranged plans—and make all I have striven to do useless. You are so impetuous—so absolutely idiotic! Call a cab for me directly. She will try to hide with Mrs. Keene. I must be there as soon as herself. She had no money—at least, I suppose not.”

“You can’t be sure, mother. How do you know there is not some infernal man helping her out-side?”

"I don't believe that! She has been well watched; and few men care to champion penniless girls who haven't even a name to call their own. Go, bring a cab quick—there is no time to lose! That woman Keene will not dare to resist me!"

* * * * *

It was past three o'clock when Mrs. Keene retired, as was her wont, to her private parlour for half-an-hour's reading and repose. She had settled herself with the morning paper in peace; for her grand-daughter was beginning to be a great help, as she developed decided business faculties and an aptitude for keeping the servants up to the collar. So Mrs. Keene enjoyed her mid-day breathing space all the more, as she knew that Wilhelmina was out and about. The good woman had only just begun to experience the first delightful symptoms of drowsiness, when Wilhelmina burst in, greatly excited, and exclaimed—

"Lor', grannie, Miss Dallas is outside at the side door! I'm going to let her in. I'm sure she has run away."

She dashed through the door communicating with the next house.

“Why, goodness gracious me!” cried Mrs. Keene, wide awake in a moment and bustling after her, but pausing to turn the key in the lock of the door by which Wilhelmina had entered. “Miss Myra, my dear child, what’s the matter?”

There in the small square entry stood Myra, white to the lips, with a strained, hunted look in her eyes, her parcel held tightly against her breast.

“I have run away,” she whispered; “and I will never go back. Will you take me in for a little while?”

“Ay, my dear, for a long while. Have they been treating you bad?”

“No, no—not at all. I will tell you all about it when my heart does not beat so fast.”

“They’ll be after you, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes. I had quite an extraordinary escape; for Lionel chased me before I was three minutes out of the house.”

“Then you mustn’t be found here. Willy, take her up to your room; and put on your hat and things. I’ll bring up some wine and a biscuit, and tell you what’s to be done.”

With a sense of unspeakable relief Myra followed Wilhelmina upstairs, and, sinking on the nearest chair, let the long-threatening tears flow at last.

Mrs. Keene soon made her appearance, breathless with hospitable haste, and carrying the promised refreshment.

“There, missie, you drink up that glass of port—it is real good—and eat a biscuit. Now listen to me, Willy, while you put on your things. You take Miss Dallas up this little street, call the first cab you see, and drive to Mr. Dobbs, the Railway Hotel. It ain’t a grand place, but clean and respectable. Mr. Dobbs is a great friend of mine and of Keene’s; and you’ll have a nice room and be safe till we can turn ourselves round. You tell Mr. Dobbs from me, Willy, that I haven’t room for Miss—don’t you say Dallas, anything will do—Smith—ay, Miss Smith—so I’m answerable for all expenses. Order a nice dinner, and you stay with her till I come, which won’t be till late. It’s likely Mrs. Dallas may drive up any minute; and she’ll put on detectives, and the Lord knows what. I can’t tell what rights she may have to claim you.

I *do* wish Keene were here, *I do*! Where's Mr. Leyton?"

"In Paris or Brussels. He wrote to me, but I was in such a hurry to tear up the letter that I have forgotten his address."

"Dear, dear—that's a pity! We'll keep things quiet till we can find him. Men—especially gentlemen—know a heap *we* don't. Are you ready, Willy—are you ready?"

"Yes, grannie."

"Well, you go out of the front door, as if you were going shopping, and turn towards town; then you can get back a little higher up by Carter Mews—it's pretty quiet at this time—and wait a little above there. In ten minutes I'll let Miss Myra out by the side door."

"All right, gran'! Suppose I take Miss Myra's parcel—that will look like shopping?"

"Well thought! Off with you!"

When she was gone, Mrs. Keene took Myra in her arms and kissed her.

"You'll excuse me, my poor, dear child," she said, her kind eyes full of tears, "but I thank God that I have a chance of paying back a little

bit of the debt I owe your angel mother. It wasn't only that I owe her my life ; but when that was done, she was so sweet, so friendly. I wish she had been spared to know you and love you."

"And be my friend—my protectress. I am so awfully alone, Mrs. Keene."

"So you are, my poor lamb ; but you'll find friends—I am sure you will. Come, now, let's go look for Willy—it's time you were out of this. Mrs. Dallas might be here any moment ; and I want to pull myself together before she comes. She is a deep, shrewd woman. Come away !"

They descended to the little entry. Mrs. Keene opened the street-door and peeped forth twice. The second time she drew in her head triumphantly.

"There she is—four or five houses up. Go on, my dear. God bless you ! Keep up your heart ! I'll be with you about eight—or before, may-be."

She watched till she saw the two girls meet and walk away in a northerly direction. Then she returned to her parlour, replaced the key in its usual position, settled herself in her arm-chair, and took up her paper.

"I must have my wits about me with that woman," she mused; "she is as deep as a well. I must just forget I have seen the dear young lady, and seem as frightened as I should be if I didn't know where she was. Ah, *I* didn't live with Russians for nothing."

She turned her eyes on the paper with very vague ideas as to what was printed there. Hardly had she thus composed herself when one of the servants entered to say that Mrs. Dallas wished to speak with her.

"Oh, show her in," cried Mrs. Keene, in a loud, cheerful tone, judging—and justly—that the visitor had followed closely.

Mrs. Dallas looked darker than ever, and her eyes were dangerously bright when she walked in. She kept a fair front, however, and bade Mrs. Keene "Good-morning" graciously enough.

"Pray, is my niece with you?" she asked, gently.

"Miss Myra?"—in a surprised tone. "Was she coming to see me, 'm?"

"I am not sure; I thought she might."

"No, I haven't seen her for weeks, 'm—not

since the evening I took the liberty of calling at your house."

"Indeed!"—looking at her very keenly. "Are you quite sure she has not been here?"

"I am ready to swear she never crossed that threshold since you were here with her;" and Mrs. Keene looked towards the door by which her visitor had just entered. Her tone was so unhesitating that Mrs. Dallas felt baffled.

"I am amazed," she said, after a moment's thought. "If you will be silent in the matter I shall trust you with the reason of my inquiries, for I wish to keep the whole thing secret. Miss Dallas has left my house, my protection—run away in short."

"But—my goodness gracious!—what made her do that? Had you any falling out?"

"No, not at all; I only fear she may have formed some acquaintance, some attachment, unknown to me, and of which she knows I should disapprove, and eloped with a lover."

"Dear, dear!—the folly of girls! Young ladies, and all! Have you no idea at all who it might be, 'm?"

"No; have you?"—sharply. It struck her quick sense that Mrs. Keene would have shown more emotion if such a possibility was then presented to her for the first time.

"Me? No, I have no notion. But, goodness gracious! aren't you going to advertise and set detectives on her track? Why, my head's just turning at the idea of the poor young lady wandering about in the hands of some villain! How was it you took your eyes off her?"

This outburst took Mrs. Dallas rather aback.

"I did keep her pretty close, but I had no reason to doubt her. How she got away I cannot think, for I don't believe she had a penny in her pocket."

"Kept her like that, the cruel slave-driver!" thought Mrs. Keene. "Then depend upon it some one outside helped her," she said aloud.

"I fancy so," said Mrs. Dallas, rising, seeing she could make nothing of her interlocutor. "I must go now to secure the help of the police."

"Ay, do, 'm, and lose no time. Then you will advertise, I suppose? I'd put it in the penny papers as well as the *Times*, if I was you."

"It's an awful business. My great desire is to shield the poor silly girl from scandal. I am still willing to take her back, though she has been shamefully ungrateful."

"Well, that is not like her, Mrs. Dallas."

"No, certainly not; which makes me feel all the more convinced that she is acting under some influence unknown to us."

"It certainly looks like it," returned Mrs. Keene, following her with deferential politeness.

At the door Mrs. Dallas turned and cast one comprehensive, hungry, unsatisfied look round the room.

"Good-morning," she said, with a slight bend of the head as she passed out. "Cunning old fox! She knows more than she pretends," was her mental commentary.

"You may suspect, but you can't prove," thought Mrs. Keene.

CHAPTER XVII.

PLOT AND COUNTER-PLOT.

MYRA experienced a delicious sense of safety and freedom when the landlord of the Railway Hotel, a modest hostelry near King's Cross, received her and the protecting Wilhelmina with frank, kind civility. Any friend of Mr. and Mrs. Keene was especially welcome. There was a nice, large, airy room at the young lady's service, rather high up, but quiet and comfortable. Was any luggage coming?

"Not to-day," said Wilhelmina, with presence of mind; "but my grandmamma will be here later and let you know."

The room to which they were conducted was cheerful and comfortable, and furnished so as to serve as sitting and bed-room both. Having asked and received instructions (from Wilhelmina) regarding tea with cold tongue and water-cress, the

friendly host left them to themselves, to Wilhelmina's great delight.

"Let me help you off with your hat and cape, Miss Myra, and put away your things. Oh, do tell me all about everything; I am just dying to know! Did they treat you cruel bad?"

"No! no, indeed! Only I grew stupidly frightened; and even now I am not sure whether I have been foolish or wise. You see I had grown nervous and unhappy. I am sure no one *can* be happy living in utter dependence on another, unless, indeed, it is upon one's own father or mother. Oh, Willy! my head seems turning round still. I thought my heart would burst with beating when I turned and saw Lionel running after me."

"Dear, dear! What is he like? Is he very ugly?"

"No, by no means. He is good-looking, and can be very pleasant."

"My goodness! Well, that's funny!" cried Wilhelmina still highly excited, and rapidly arranging Myra's few belongings in drawers and wardrobe, while she continued to ply her with questions, which Myra only partially answered, adding, "for you know,

Willy, dear, I want to tell Mrs. Keene every little thing when she comes."

"And you will let me stay and hear it all?" cried Willy.

"Oh, certainly, of course." So Wilhelmina, finding she must wait, filled up the time by imparting much information respecting the hotel, grannie, grandpa, and the new piano he was going to buy her; the lessons she had been taking from Herr Roscher, the celebrated pianist, and how he had said it was a shame that she, who was half German, could not speak a word of that beautiful, magnificent language. Tea also helped to pass the time; still, it seemed woefully long till Mrs. Keene made her appearance, though she came sooner than she had promised.

"Well, my dear young lady," she exclaimed breathlessly, when she had sat down to rest after her ascent, "I have been burning to come, but I didn't dare to till things were pretty well over for the day. *She* has been with me, and I can tell you I shook in my shoes under those wicked black eyes of hers. But she got precious little out of me, I can tell you. No, dear, no tea for me. Just begin

and tell me everything ; we have a good bit to settle about, and I mustn't stay too long. Willy, dear, you had better go home, as——”

“Me? No, that I won't!” interrupted Willy, “till I've heard everything.”

“Well, stay then! Now, Miss Myra, my dear?”

Whereupon Myra began—starting from the first warning of Mrs. Dwyer, and describing their nocturnal interview; her despair at the sudden appearance of Lionel, her ruse to evade him—at which Willy clapped her hands—and then her horror on discovering that he was in hot pursuit. “I felt as if all was over,” continued Myra, pushing back her hair in the eagerness of narration, “but I fled on. Turning the corner, I saw a gentleman standing on the pavement speaking to the driver of a hansom, his back was to me. I never hesitated, there was not another spot I could shelter in. I passed the gentleman and sprang into the cab. In all my agony of fear I saw the wonder in his eyes. ‘Oh, do let me go a little way in your cab! I am in such a dreadful hurry—any way, only for a few minutes, do, do, do!’ I suppose I looked wild and miserable, for he just said, ‘Quick!’ to the driver, got in, and we were off.

There was a little road on the right, the driver turned down it, and the gentleman looked at me curiously. He was elderly, with grey hair, and a blunt sort of nose; but though he seemed amused, for his eyes twinkled, he looked good-natured. 'I am going to Kensington,' he said presently, 'will that suit you?'

"'Oh, yes! anywhere will do!'

"'Do you want to go much further?'

"'Yes,' I said, 'a good deal.'

"'Shall I set you down at the station?'

"'No, thank you! I shall walk.'

"'You don't look up to a long walk, young lady,' said he kindly. I suppose I looked ghastly.

"'I must walk, for I have no money.' I was sorry I said so, it looked like begging. He only said, 'That's a bad business. I am probably a block-head to meddle, but—you are very young—and I hope you are not jumping out of some frying-pan of uncomfortable constraint into the fire of permanent evil.' There was such a grave, warning sound in his voice, that I felt hot all over; and I could not help saying, 'I am going to a kind, good woman, who will take care of me!'

"'That's all right,' he returned; but it did not

sound as if he quite believed me. But I was frightened at having said so much, and kept quiet.

“The next thing he said was, ‘I am going to stop for a few minutes in Kensington, and then I go on to Oxford Circus; will that be in your way?’ I exclaimed, ‘Oh, yes! that will be a great help.’ So we went on, and stopped at a house in Kensington Square, where he left his card and a little packet. When he came back, I asked him what o’clock it was; he told me five minutes past three, and so we went on. Once he asked, looking at my parcel with such a droll twinkle in his eye, ‘Are you going to “try on” anyone?’ I laughed and said I wished I were a good dressmaker, it was work which paid very well. Then he said, ‘I should like to know who you are, for you puzzle me a good deal.’ So I replied, ‘I am nobody! Will you be so very kind as not to tell anyone you ever met so very bold and presumptuous a girl as myself! I do not want to do any harm, I only want peace and freedom to work for myself.’

“‘I must say you look all right,’ he said. By that time we came to the Circus, and the cab stopped opposite Peter Robinson’s. He handed me out most

politely, saying very kindly, 'I suppose I must not go further with you?'

"'Oh, no! pray do not!'" I exclaimed, 'and do forget all about me!'

"'That's not so easy!'" were his last words as I hurried on to Gilbert Street. Thank God! Willy saw me as I watched for a chance to get in unseen."

"Yes," interrupted Wilhelmina. "I had gone into the front parlour to see if it had been properly cleaned after those untidy Australians, and going to the window I saw a young lady with a parcel pass at the other side of the street. I thought she was like Miss Myra, and as I stood watching she turned and stopped, looking towards our door; then I saw it *was* Miss Myra. I ran to the door, but somehow it came to me from the way she stopped that she did not wish to be seen, so I pointed to the corner, thinking she would see I meant to open the side door for her. So she did, and I don't believe a soul knows she came into our house."

"My goodness gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Keene. "I never heard anything so wonderful and extraordinary. I could never have believed

missie, you'd have had such pluck and presence of mind. Now the great point is, what to do next? They must not find you too soon; of course they *will* find you; nobody can keep hidden always. But if you could keep out of the way till you are twenty-one, then you can do as you like and live where you please. I am awful ignorant about such things, so I'm not sure whether Mrs. Dallas could force you back if you were still an infant, as they call it. Mightn't you ask Mr. Leyton?"

"I might; he will not be long away."

"How would it do to speak to Lady Shirland?"

"Oh, no; she thinks so much of my aunt, she would not listen to me, and I should not like to speak against Mrs. Dallas to her best friend. Perhaps I ought to have had more courage and patience; perhaps Mrs. Dwyer exaggerated. I do not know whether to rejoice because I have escaped, or to be ashamed of having taken fright."

"My dear young lady, I am thankful you have come to me. Now you had better not stay with us. But I'll tell you what I can do; I'll run down to

my sisters' at Redworth, and see what I can settle with them. You must keep close till I can get you away. At any rate, you are safe here. I am afraid even of your being with my sisters, though they would make much of you; but, you see, that woman will set on detectives, and they'll hunt up everything and every person connected with me, for she must know you'd come to me. If we can keep quiet till I can ask Mr. Leyton, or till Keene comes back, that we may make no mistake!"

"I will do whatever you think best, dear, kind friend, and—here, I have saved this, thanks to poor Mrs. Dwyer." She drew forth the ring she had concealed so successfully, and handed it to her faithful ally. "Will you take that and sell it for me, and give me a little of the money? Keep the rest, for I fear I shall cost you a great deal."

"My!" ejaculated Wilhelmina, "what a beauty!—a great, big, blue sapphire."

"Why, sapphires are always blue, you silly," said her grandmother. "This is worth a good deal, missie," she continued. "I'll see to it, so do not disturb yourself about money. I have

brought you a little—half a sovereign in gold and the rest in change; you'll not want to spend anything here. To-morrow, early, I'll run down to my sisters' and be back by the evening. Then we'll see what to do."

"I should like to send a few lines to Mrs. Dallas to say I am safe and well."

"She don't deserve it, Miss Myra; you don't seem to see all the vile wickedness she was plotting against you."

"I do not quite believe it; besides——"

"It will only serve to put those devils on your track."

"Well, then, I shall wait; but I must send Mrs. Dwyer a line."

"That's another matter. We'll get the barmaid below to address it, or—no, may-be I'd best do it myself. I wish you'd let that alone too, missie."

"Oh, I do not like to leave her without some intimation that I am safe and well."

After some discussion, it was decided that Myra should write to Mrs. Dwyer, but leave her aunt for the present in the dark.

This note written, Mrs. Keene insisted on Wilhelmina returning home.

"We had best not go back together," she said. "What o'clock is it, Willy?"

"Ten minutes to nine."

"Oh, it's too late, then. I had a mind to run down to my sisters' straight away this very evening, for I may have a detective after me to-morrow; so I will be off at cock-crow to-morrow morning. Come, you get off, Willy."

"Don't be late, grannie," returned that young lady, preparing reluctantly to depart. "I may come and see Miss Myra to-morrow, mayn't I?"

"I'm not sure, my dear; we'll see what turns up. Miss Myra is too brave to mind being left alone when it's for her own good."

"No, of course not, but I should like a book, or something to do."

"Yes, sure; we have a good lot at home. They are a bit battered; people leave them behind when they have done with them. Willy will manage to bring or send them. If she doesn't come you may be sure it ain't safe."

Wilhelmina departed, having taken a very

effusive farewell of Myra, and Mrs. Keene remained to speak a few comforting words to the desolate girl, who, worn out with the terror and excitement she had undergone, shrank from being left alone in this strange place.

"There's nothing can happen to you, dearie," urged Mrs. Keene. "Dobbs is a good, honest soul as ever lived, there's a lock to your door, and you're as safe as you can be. You will hear from or see one of us to-morrow. God bless you, my dear! It's a bad bit of the road for you, but it won't last long. I wish you could remember Mr. Leyton's address. Mightn't you write to him to his place in town?"

"I might—but—but—I hardly like to trouble him."

"My dear, all he wants is to help you. I dare-say your father was a good friend to him, as your dear mother was to me. Well—well, if you have nothing else to leave your children, it's something to bequeath them your claims to gratitude. Try to sleep, and try to eat; for if we don't keep the body in working order the mind is no good."

Left alone, Myra lost no time in retiring to

rest. Fatigue had done its work; and, contrary to her expectations, she slept profoundly.

Mrs. Keene got home as fast as she could. She found Wilhelmina waiting for her with a troubled face.

“I don’t know what to think,” she said, “and I don’t know what you’ll think, grannie; but I had hardly got my hat off when I came back before a gentleman drove up with a hat-box and a portmanteau, and asked if we could take him in. They brought him to me. I said you were in bed with a bad headache, and that we never took in anyone without an introduction. He said he had met grandfather at Biarritz about a week ago—you know he *was* going there—that Lord Hargrave was coming back in about a month, and that he had promised grandfather to come straight here. He has been a courier himself, but he left off, and has come to London on a little business; so I let him have the front parlour and the little bedroom on the first landing.”

“I don’t like the look of it,” said Mrs. Keene, sitting down suddenly. “What is he like?”

“Oh, a quiet, simple, broad-faced man, clean-

shaved, and very well dressed. He made no trouble at all about money."

"I daresay not. I wish you hadn't had a spot to put him in."

"But, grannie, I was afraid of turning away a friend of gran'dad's. He looks quite nice—a little like a German."

"He's none the better for that—any way, we'll see. I am just dead beat, Willie; and I wanted to be off by the seven train to-morrow. But I think I'll wait a bit later, and have a look at our new guest. It's as well not to leave *you* alone with him. Now come to bed; I expect I'll do a lot of thinking there."

* * * * *

It was with a maddening sense of defeat that Mrs. Dallas re-entered her cab after her abortive interview with the proprietor of Keene's Hotel. Her belief that Myra had taken refuge there was not for a moment shaken; but to prove it was the difficulty.

"Short as the time was, she has got her off, I fancy. I cannot fathom this extraordinary step of Myra's. I could not have believed she would

have done anything so decided ; yet I don't think it is possible she could have communicated with anyone. She has always seemed transparent—she *is* transparent ! What an outrageous insult it seems that she should be able to snap her fingers at us,” thought Mrs. Dallas bitterly, as she rumbled south-westward to report progress to her son, whom she left in a state bordering on temporary insanity.

“Who can have helped her ? I have a vague idea that Mrs. Dwyer had a kind of sympathy with Myra ; but she is a grasping woman, and, unless she thought she could make something by it she would not have moved in the matter. I must get Lionel to ascertain where Keene is. He will find out at Lord Hargrave's house.”

Lionel was watching for her at the dining-room window, and ran out to meet her. As soon as they had closed the door he exclaimed—

“What news ?”

“None. We were not quick enough. Mrs. Keene's manner was so unhesitating, so decided, that I believe she was not in the house. But she must have gone there. I know of no other place

where she could possibly go, unless there is a lover in the case.

“Which I am inclined to think there is,” cried Lionel. “Some infernal cold-blooded Englishman—nothing else can account for her indifference to me—and Leyton is the man. I wish—I wish I had my fingers on his throat!” and he walked up and down the room in an agony of anger and mortification.

“I am sure you are mistaken. Leyton is not the sort of man to care for a mere unformed girl like——”

“You know nothing about it,” interrupted Lionel rudely. “No woman understands the attraction of another. I would give my soul for Myra—if I have one. Get her for me, or I’ll look on you as an enemy—a detested enemy!”

“My dear, dear Lionel, you must have lost your senses. You know I would risk everything to gratify you,” cried Mrs. Dallas. “Listen to me; for you can do nothing without me. Remember that if we do not trace her soon she will be lost to us; for I am very uncertain what power I may possess to reclaim her. The influence of my pre-

sence, *if* I can pounce upon her quickly, may compel her to return. Meantime, our best plan is to create an impression that she is of unsound mind; then, if the question arises of her sanity, and I am willing to undertake the maintenance of a pauper lunatic, I do not doubt I should acquire a legal right to her guardianship. With this object I shall give the utmost publicity to her flight. I shall cross-examine Mrs. Dwyer, and apply to Lady Shirland for advice, and—— Shall I play a bold game, and ask information from Leyton?”

“No! a thousand devils, no!” said Lionel pausing in his march to and fro. “He used to be in Munich, God knows what he may have learned. It is this delay that endangers everything; curse her stupid obstinacy! I could curse her, ay! and torture her between the kisses I long to press upon that sweet mouth of hers!”

“Do not lose your self-control, Lionel, and never, never let anyone but myself hear you speak in this way. Can you not see that the only chance of success in *any* scheme is to hold the reins of your impulses so that none shall ever know the

truth about your wishes, your intentions. Be guided by me. Obey me, both in the spirit and in the letter, and I swear you shall have this sweet, blue-eyed fool to kiss or crush as you like!"

Lionel stood for a moment in thought. Then he passed his hand over his face, and said with sudden calmness—

"I put myself into your hands, and if you succeed——"

"You will love your mother, Lionel? You will return her something of the devotion——" She tried to put her arms round him as she spoke.

"Oh, yes! of course," he interrupted impatiently, giving her a rapid kiss on the brow; "but don't let us waste time in sentimentalising. What do you propose to do?"

Mrs. Dallas drew back and sighed.

"First I shall interview Mrs. Dwyer. Then you must go to Lord Hargrave's house—there's the address, it is quite near—ascertain where they are, where they are going, when they are expected home. Take pencil and note-book, write all down, make

no mistake; be sure to find out if Keene is with them. Then go to Dempsey's Private Inquiry Office, and ask for one of their best men to meet me here as soon as possible. He must come prepared for immediate service. I shall go to Lady Shirland. Above all, be calm!"

She rang, and both kept profound silence till Mrs. Dwyer presented herself.

"Pray, sit down, Mrs. Dwyer, I want to speak to you," began Mrs. Dallas in a most friendly tone. "We are terribly puzzled about my niece. Did she say anything to you about staying out this evening? going to Lady Shirland's, or to Mrs. Keene?"

"Is it to me, ma'am? Not a syllable. What's gone with her, ma'am?"

"Well, I cannot make out exactly. Did you see her go out?"

"No, 'm. I did hear her ask Mr. Ashby to go with her to some shop. Then I heard the door bang, a bit after, and thought they had gone together; that's all I know."

"She has not returned, and I feel a little uneasy."

Law, ma'am ! may-be she has only gone to see Mrs. Keene, and will be back presently !”

“Unfortunately, I have lost that hope ; I have been to Mrs. Keene's, and she has not been there. It is a little alarming ; for it is such a causeless disappearance, when we were on such friendly terms, so confidential, that knowing her poor father was slightly insane at one time, I feel very anxious. Pray, Mrs. Dwyer, have you seen any symptoms of unsoundness in the poor, dear girl ?”

“Well, 'm,” slowly, “I am not sure that I have. She was a little queer about a ring she had ; she had a fancy that someone wanted to steal it.”

“How strange !” cried Mrs. Dallas with a quick glance at her son ; “surely she did not suspect that nice, respectable Jane ?”

“Oh, dear, no, 'm !” drily.

“Pray, when did she speak of this to you ?”

“Oh ! one morning I went in to wind the dining room clock, 'm.”

“That did not look like sanity ?”

“Well, no, 'm. It *was* a little queer.”

"I shall go to Lady Shirland's before I take off my bonnet," resumed Mrs. Dallas, "and if she is not there, nor at the school, why, I must advertise. It is a most painful business."

"I wouldn't be in too great a hurry, 'm, she may be in in an hour or two; it's not half-past seven yet!"

"I shall look if she has taken any clothes with her. If not, she had, no doubt, the intention of returning."

"That's true! Are you sure you know what things she had?"

"Very nearly, seeing they are almost all my gifts!"

"See that, now! I'm sure you were a real mother to her, 'm."

"You think so, Mrs. Dwyer?"

"Oh, yes, that I do, ma'am!"

"I will not detain you any longer, Mrs. Dwyer! Come, Lionel, my dear, give me your arm to Lady Shirland's, I really feel hardly able to stand!"

"I will get you a cab, mother! You are quite unfit to walk!"

Once in the street, they parted company, Lionel

going on his errand, and Mrs. Dallas proceeding to Caterham Gardens, where she was informed that her ladyship was at dinner, as she was going to the theatre.

“I will wait till she has finished, if she is alone with Miss Browne.”

“Her ladyship has no company, ma’am, and dinner is nearly over.”

Mrs. Dallas had not waited more than a few minutes in the morning-room, when both Lady Shirland and Miss Browne appeared.

“What in the world is the matter, my dear Mrs. Dallas?” cried the former.

“You look awfully upset,” said Miss Browne.

“I *am*, dear. I have come to ask what I now fear is a useless question. Have you seen or heard anything of Myra to-day?”

“Of Myra? No. Why, what has happened?” cried Lady Shirland and Dorothea together.

“Oh!” exclaimed Mrs. Dallas, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, “I do not know what has become of her. On my return from the city this afternoon I found my poor, dear boy in a state of distraction.”

She proceeded to give the details of Myra's flight.

"It seems incredible that she should be so painfully foolish," exclaimed Lady Shirland at the end of the narrative, "as to risk forfeiting all the advantages a residence with you secures. Depend upon it, it is some freak. You will find her at home when you return."

"Alas! I fear not," said Mrs. Dallas in a voice broken by emotion. "I have looked in her wardrobe, and she has evidently taken clothes, etc., with her."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Dorothea, clasping her hands, "whom can she have eloped with?"

"Pray, why do you suppose she must have eloped with anyone, Dorothea?" asked Lady Shirland sharply.

"Well, is it not the most likely thing, mamma?"

"No doubt," said Mrs. Dallas, drying her tearless eyes and recovering herself; "but I agree with dear Lady Shirland—I do not think she has eloped with anyone."

"Have you gone to Mr. Leyton's lodgings?" said Dorothea.

"Why, he is away—he is in Paris," cried Lady Shirland.

"He *was*," returned Dorothea emphatically; "but he may have returned. Indeed, it may be useless to inquire at his usual abode."

"Why, Dorothea, you are making Jack Leyton out a villain," said Lady Shirland indignantly.

"I don't wish to do so; but if Myra has run away from her happy home *without* a companion, why, she must be mad."

"That is just it, dear Dorothea," said Mrs. Dallas despondently. "I am much more inclined to believe that some sudden failure of reason, rather than flight with a lover, actuated poor Myra. A gentler, more delicate, modest creature never existed. She had become quite a daughter to me." (Handkerchief again.)

"It is deplorable and inexplicable," observed Lady Shirland. "In any case, my dear Mrs. Dallas, I should let Mr. Leyton know. He is greatly interested in the unhappy girl, and—— You'll excuse us if we leave you. We have to

pick up Lady Georgina Leslie on the way ;
so——”

“ Oh, certainly—of course. Can you give me Mr. Leyton’s address—his Paris address ? ”

“ No ; but write to his lodgings—they will forward the letter.”

“ I certainly will, Lady Shirland ; and don’t let me detain you.”

“ The carriage is at the door. Let them take you home while we are putting on our cloaks. *Do* let me have a line to say if you have had any news ; and advertise, my dear Mrs. Dallas. Lose no time. Thomas, tell the coachman to set Mrs. Dallas down and return for us.”

Cordial good-nights were exchanged.

“ Well, ’m, any news of the poor dear young lady ? ” asked Mrs. Dwyer anxiously.

She had come to the door herself when Mrs. Dallas rang.

“ None, I am sorry to say,” dejectedly. “ Hasn’t my son come in yet ? ”

“ No, ’m ; no one has come. There are some letters for you in the dining-room.”

They were ordinary notes and circulars ; so

Mrs. Dallas asked for tea, and waited as patiently as she could for more than an hour. Then a cab stopped, there was a ring, and Lionel entered with an eager, almost hopeful look.

“I have got all the information you wanted, mother, and the best man they have at Dempsey’s. He is outside. Shall I bring him in?”

“By all means. We’ll do something now.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BREATHING SPACE.

THOROUGHLY worn out by the fatigue and excitement of the day, Myra slept soundly and woke refreshed. It was some minutes before she could shake off the puzzled, dazed sensation of waking in a totally strange place, and recall the circumstances which led here there. The more she thought, the more troubled she was concerning her own conduct. Had she been too precipitate? Had she given too ready credence to Mrs. Dwyer? Perhaps so. But while she spoke it had seemed to Myra that all she said, all she suggested, was absolute truth. Perhaps she ought to have openly declared her intention of leaving to Mrs. Dallas. But could she have carried out that intention? She did not know what powers her aunt might possess. At all events, Mrs. Dwyer's communication put her into a wild state of terror, and rendered her quite incapable of

reasoning. Even now, when she was comparatively safe and calm, she shuddered at the idea of being alone with Mrs. Dallas and her son, away from the very few in whom she trusted. Yes; she had done well in escaping. When would Mrs. Keene come to talk with and comfort her?

An elderly, good-natured looking chambermaid brought her breakfast, and with it a little note addressed to "Miss Smith."

It was from Wilhelmina, and was very brief: "My mother desires me to say that she cannot come to see you till the afternoon; then one or other of us will be sure to come."

It was a long and miserable morning, partly spent in reading the *Times* diligently, partly in musing over the difficulties before her. What should she do to earn her living? Would Mrs. Fairchild take her back? No! she greatly feared she would not. When should she have a chance of taking counsel with Jack Leyton? He could solve all her doubts, and advise her how to act. The weary hours dragged through. She made a pretence of eating some dinner, and had noticed that the clock over a shop opposite had just struck half-past two, when someone tapped

at the door. Myra went to it and hesitated, when a voice said through the keyhole, "It's *me*, Miss Myra," and Myra gladly opened to admit Wilhelmina, who, rather to her dismay, was followed by a tall, thin, hard-featured woman, with dark hair and eyes, high cheek-bones, a good deal of colour, and a generally weather-beaten complexion. She was well, even handsomely dressed in thick brown silk, a brown straw bonnet profusely decorated with yellow daisies, and a large black lace shawl."

"Don't be frightened, Miss Myra," exclaimed Wilhelmina. "This is grannie's sister, Miss Foley. I call her auntie! Grannie couldn't come herself. I'll tell you all about it." She dragged in a small valise and shut the door as she spoke, turning the key.

"I am very pleased to see any relations of dear Mrs. Keene!" said Myra warmly.

"Thank you, miss. I have come here just on purpose to help you. Mrs. Keene has told me all about everything, and often and often have I heard her talk of your good mamma! You'll please come away with me to my place for a bit. Though it is but a shop, you shall be safe and comfortable till

such time as things come right. Here's a letter from my sister, who tells you all about it."

Myra took and read the following letter:—

"I can't come and see you, missee, my dear, a horrid man has taken the front parlour, and I'm not sure but he may be spying on me, so I won't venture out. I telegraphed for my sister, and told her your whole story, so she is ready to take care of you for some weeks. You go with her, my dear, for she is a good, faithful woman, and so's my younger sister, Letitia. You will be happy with them, and when I think it is safe I will come and see you. Willy will tell you all the rest. I have given my sister a little bit of money for you—five pounds—on account of the ring. You make it go as far as you can. God bless you! my dear young lady. Your ever attached and respectful—C. KEENE."

"How good of you to take this trouble for me!" cried Myra with moist eyes; "I am so ashamed of causing it all!"

"Oh, never mind that, miss, if only we can make things right; and they will come right, I have no doubt," said Miss Foley.

"And oh, Miss Myra!" cried Wilhelmina triumphantly, "we have had a time of it! Last night, quite late, just before grannie came home, a man drove up with luggage, and took a room, saying he

knew father, and had promised him to come to our hotel. I didn't like to turn him away, but grannie, she was almost angry with me for letting him in. I don't think there's any harm in the man; he writes a good bit in the window, and is in and out and up and down the passage. So gran' would not go down to see auntie, but telegraphed for her to come up. I took the telegram my own self at eight this morning, and auntie was with us at twelve. Then grannie went in as sweet and civil as ever could be, and asked Mr. Merrydew (which is his name, he says) in to dinner, and just mentions auntie as an old customer. We had a real good dinner—ducks and peas, and a sole *au plat*—and didn't Mr. What's-his-name enjoy it; but just as the pudding was coming in—stewed rhubarb with Devonshire cream—auntie jumped up and said she had no end of shopping to do, and to catch the down train at five o'clock.

“‘Where to, ma'am?’ says our visitor, who was looking quite lazy, he had eaten such a good dinner. Something put it into my mouth to say ‘Hastings.’ I didn't think a bit, it just came! Then says aunt, ‘Come, get ready, my dear, you know you

promised to help me.' I had my hat and gloves at hand, so we were ready in a jiffy, popped into a cab, stopped it before we got to the Langham, hailed a 'bus, and here we are! I don't think Mr. Thing-a-me-bob has got over his dinner yet!"

"You are a wonderful girl, Wilhelmina!" exclaimed Myra laughing.

"She ain't dull," said Miss Foley complacently.

"Now, if you'll only not be offended, Miss Myra," resumed Wilhelmina, "I have brought my plaid dress and cape. I have worked all the morning to let it down, and it must be nearly long enough for you! Also my grey straw hat with the green feather. You see those horrid people will be looking for a young lady in black, and they'll never think it is you in colours, and grannie has put a few things in that may be useful; she hopes you'll excuse us!"

"Excuse you!" cried Myra, holding out her hand for Willy's. "I can never thank you enough for your thoughtful kindness."

"Now, Miss Dallas—I mean Miss Smith, for we had better keep up the make-believe—I *have* a little bit of shopping and business to do as I *am* in town, so I'll leave you and Willy here to-

gether. I'll come back by five; we will have a cup of tea, and take the 6.10 to Redworth."

A little more talk respecting their arrangements, and Myra's new friend set forth on her shopping. A delightful hour—to Wilhelmina, at least—ensued, spent in arraying Myra in the former's dress, hat, etc. This wrought such a complete change that Willy clapped her hands and screamed with triumph at the metamorphosis.

"If you only keep your veil down not a creature would know you," she exclaimed. "Now we'll pack your things, and have everything ready by the time Miss Foley comes back. There is another sister, a good bit younger, but she does not look it. She is so funny. This one is head man. Miss Letitia is like a child; she reads novels from morning till night, and I think she is writing a book herself; but she is *that* good-natured. Won't she be delighted to have you hiding there? It's a very nice house, and such lots and lots of books and papers, and people are always changing books (they have a circulating library), or buying books or paper, or—no end of things; market day the place is quite crowded," etc. etc.—and Wilhelmina

rattled on while Myra thought earnestly of the advisability of writing to her aunt.

"Yes," she exclaimed suddenly, "I will do it."

"What?" exclaimed Wilhelmina.

"I must send a few lines to Mrs. Dallas; if she ever cared even a little bit for me, she will be terribly anxious; but I will leave the letter open for your mother to read, and if she does not forbid it, will you post it for me?"

"All right; but, Miss Myra, I'll do better than post it. I will go down in the dusk and slip it into the letter-box, so there needn't be any post-mark to put that woman on your track. She will think you are staying in town."

Myra therefore wrote a few lines assuring Mrs. Dallas that she was safe and well, that she was grateful to her for all her kindness, but that in future she wished to earn her own bread.

These occupations filled the time till Miss Foley returned, later than she had promised, so Myra was carried away with something of hurry, that completed her nervous trepidation at finding herself in the streets under such circumstances and in such strange guise, as it seemed to her

when she caught a glimpse of herself in the glass.

It was, indeed, a terrible transformation, those flashy garments of Wilhelmina's. "I suppose I may change them when I am away from London," was her comforting reflection as she bade the owner an affectionate good-bye before leaving the hotel, it being considered imprudent that she should accompany the travellers to the station.

Myra felt, indeed, alone and afloat when she found herself steaming north-west with a stranger into the unknown.

Fortunately Miss Foley had a strong, kindly, cheerful face, with an expression which reminded the young refugee of her dear, good friend, Mrs. Keene. Myra liked her looks, and gazed at her steadily while she read the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and finally grew calm enough to peruse the *Lady's Pictorial* with which her new protectress provided her. The carriage was nearly full, so our travellers kept silence, but Myra was interested in watching the rich woodland country through which they were flying.

Redworth was a quaint old town, once renowned

for its society, when, in the old coaching times, it was a long day's journey from the metropolis. It was still a good hunting centre, and the existence of a large, well-known boys' school secured it from desertion and stagnation.

Its gabled, red-roofed houses, the beautiful ruins of an ancient abbey, and a pretty race-course, on which some of the older houses almost abutted, were sources of justifiable pride to its citizens. It was surrounded by a number of gentlemen's seats—not great palatial abodes, but comparatively small and within the reach of the smaller gentilities who dwelt in and just outside the town, attracted by moderate rents and educational advantages. It was in many ways a desirable residence, and held its own against the centralising tendencies of modern days.

It was eight o'clock before Miss Foley and her charge reached their destination. The station was outside the town at some little distance, and Miss Foley at once secured a fly from among the vehicles which usually awaited the arrival of the fast evening train from London.

"It's as well not to be shut in face to face

with a lot of people in a 'bus," said Miss Foley. "Now, my dear Miss Dallas—I mean Miss Smith—you'll find us very homely—just business people—but we'll do our very best for you and make you as comfortable as we can. Don't you be surprised at any little story I may tell about you to my sister when we first go in. I hadn't time to let her know you were coming, so I must account for you in some way."

"Very well," said Myra submissively.

Then Miss Foley exclaimed at intervals—

"There—look to your right. That's our beautiful ruin—the old abbey. There's quite a nice view of it from our back windows. That's St. Olave's Church. The rector gives us splendid sermons on Sunday evenings in summer. They say it is over five hundred years old. There—that's the cross—the town cross. Some say it's an Eleanor Cross—more say it ain't," etc. etc.

"It is a delightful, picturesque place," said Myra with hearty admiration.

Soon the fly stopped before a wide-fronted, low-windowed shop, about midway up the High Street, where prints, books, toy easels, ink-bottles, re-

quisites for the writing-table, and such-like wares of a higher-class bookseller's and stationer's shop, were set forth.

A small door admitted to the private part of the house, which was quickly opened by a solemn elderly servant, in a large old-fashioned cap and apron, both beautifully white.

"You're late, ma'am," she said, looking with some surprise at Myra. "Miss Letitia was growing anxious."

Here a small, slight woman came round a turn in the passage. She was dressed in grey, and wore a white lace fichu over her shoulders and crossed in front; a wide black sash was tied at one side in long bows and ends; her light, dull hair, which was mixed with grey and worn in a crop, curled in short, flat curls over her forehead. She had faded eyes and a small, weak mouth; while a very yellow, pale complexion suggested indigestion or indifferent health.

"Dear — dear Harriet," she said in a sweet, small voice, "I was growing quite uneasy about you."

"Oh, I always take care of myself, dear. You

see, I have brought a visitor. Miss Smith—this is my sister, Letitia. I was introduced to Miss Smith to-day; and as she is anxious to acquaint herself with the bookselling business, with a view to taking Miss Wilson's place when she marries, I persuaded her to come back with me."

This was said in an audible tone, and listened to with avidity by the servant.

"Oh, indeed. You are always prompt, sister. I am sure I am very glad to see Miss Smith. Pray, walk in—you'll want something after your journey. It is a little dark here—mind the two steps down. I'll just go on and open the door."

She went quickly and opened a door, from which the light came strongly, showing four or five steps, which led up to it.

"Take that little portmanteau to Mrs. Keene's room, Keziah," said Miss Foley, "and make up the bed. Miss Smith will stay with us for a little while. Come along, Miss Smith. This is our sitting-room, and we are a little proud of the look-out—not every town house can boast one so good."

The room in which Myra found herself was of fair dimensions and comfortably, though very

simply, furnished. It had two windows, which looked on a neatly-kept garden, ending in an ivy-covered wall, beyond which the racecourse stretched its green space, to the left of which the graceful arches and traceried windows of the ruined abbey could be seen.

"It is charming, indeed," exclaimed Myra, whose spirits had risen in proportion to her distance from London.

It was a lovely summer evening; the room faced the west, and the sky was still flaming with the crimson and violet and golden glories of the sunset, against which every line and curve of the ruins stood out softly clear. The slight breeze which so often springs up at sundown came, laden with dewy freshness, across the grassy expanse, while the sweet quiet of earth and sky was emphasised by the solemn tolling of the curfew from the tower of St. Olave's.

"How sweet—how delightful!" continued Myra, leaning from the window. "It must be good to live here."

"London people are always pleased with our old town," said Miss Letitia with a gratified

simper. "I suppose you have lived chiefly in London?"

"Yes—latterly," returned Myra. There was a little hesitation in her manner.

"Ask no more at present, sister," said Miss Foley with some solemnity. "When we are alone I shall have much to tell you respecting Miss Smith which will interest you deeply and make you still more ready to welcome her."

"Oh, indeed. Dear, dear! I am all curiosity," exclaimed Letitia. "But what will you take? You must be famished."

"We will wait for supper, which will be ready as usual, I suppose, at nine."

"Just so, Harriet; and may-be Miss Smith will come to my room to take off her things."

There was something in the quiet, refined homeliness of this humble *bourgeois* establishment that soothed and comforted our young waif, and gave her a sense of security, of confidence, of which the last six months of her life had been singularly denuded.

The little supper-table was well furnished and neatly spread, while the conversation, if not bril-

liant, was sensible and sincere. Miss Wilson—the assistant for whose post Myra was supposed to be an aspirant—was a plain, sandy-haired young woman with spectacles; and on being told the reason of Myra's sudden appearance, showed much interest in her, and put some leading questions, of a somewhat embarrassing description, as to her previous training, whether she had ever been “out” before, or if she had attempted any other line of business. Miss Foley, however, was quite equal to the occasion, and nipped all unwelcome curiosity in the bud.

Finally, it was very delightful to go to bed in the neat, exquisitely clean chamber allotted to her, where the sheets smelt of lavender, and the roses and clematis which clothed the back of the house peeped in at the window, while the profound stillness was only broken by the chiming of quarters and half-hours by the deep, musically toned town clock.

How delicious it was to feel sleep creeping over her, and a sort of hope that here she might find rest, occupation, perhaps humble independence; so, softly and graciously, life and its grim realities

faded temporarily away, and balmy sleep settled down upon her weary senses.

The first glance at Miss Letitia's face next morning told Myra that the whole of her story had been revealed to the sympathetic spinster. She looked at their young guest with almost awed admiration, and ministered to her with delighted alacrity.

As, in the natural division of labour at "Foley's Library," a good deal of housekeeping and very little shopkeeping fell to Miss Letitia's lot, she felt free to lionise Myra about the old town, and enjoyed the idea of introducing her to its beauties and peculiarities, feeling very keenly that sense of ownership in their abode which is peculiar to the inhabitants of small places.

At first, however, Myra was nervous and averse to venture out, nor did she like to go into the shop nor the sort of reading-room over it, where the magazines and newspapers lay on a large table and another assistant presided over the library department.

A few days of unbroken quiet and the assurances of Miss Foley revived Myra's courage, while

the natural desire to look about urged her to explore a new place.

"I suppose I may wear my own dress now?" she asked. "I have grown accustomed to black, and do not like myself in colours."

"Not in those colours, I should think," said Miss Foley, with a sniff. "Wilhelmina likes to make a peacock of herself, and has that opinion of her own taste, she wouldn't listen to any suggestion. You put on your own clothes, my dear; you are safe enough here."

"I do not want to wear out Wilhelmina's things. I might get an everyday frock for myself," continued Myra, smiling at the joyful idea of having a little money to do what she liked with, "for I should like really to go into the shop and be your assistant. I know I am stupid about some things, but I would try hard to learn."

Myra knew nothing about aristocratic prejudices; to be happy and independent was all she asked for; yet the greatest lady in the land could not shrink with greater horror from vulgarity and ugliness than she did.

"My dear young lady, I hope there is a brighter future before you than that." *

"Why? I could be very happy here. Pray let me try to learn your business."

So Myra made herself quite at home, and brought an unusual element of sweetness and light into the somewhat monotonous existence of her kind protectors.

When Miss Letitia found that "Miss Smith" could draw—nay, more—when she had made some sketches of the priory ruins, outside and inside, her pride and pleasure knew no bounds. Miss Foley had them framed, ticketed at a moderate price, and placed prominently in her window.

"They are just like the old place," she said, "and I shouldn't wonder if they went off well."

"I will take 'Miss Smith' to Wickham Woods to-morrow," said Miss Letitia. "It is just lovely along by the river and the old bridge. It isn't more than a mile to the woods, and there are always logs lying about which we can sit down on. People are not generally allowed through, but the gamekeeper's wife at the lodge knows me, and will let us in. It makes it all the safer. Captain

Forrester, the Squire of Wickham, is very particular, but he is not a bad landlord. Ah, his father used to keep the place alive in the old times."

To Myra, Wickham Woods was a terrestrial Paradise, abounding in delicious "bits," and she made many studies there, sometimes with Letitia and occasionally without her. So absorbing was this occupation that she began to forget her fear of detectives, her dread of being dragged back to Mrs. Dallas and Lionel. Indeed, Miss Foley expressed her doubts that any aunt could keep her against her will.

Meanwhile, with a curious reluctance, Myra made up her mind to write to Leyton at his lodgings. She did not like to trouble him; she dreaded falling, through him, into the claws of Dorothea; and finally, she was foolishly ashamed of having torn up his letter without noting the address he gave her.

There was an unusual mixture of child and woman in Myra; to a certain point she had the courage of her opinions, but beside this stronger line ran a fainter parallel, which made her shrink

from the rebukes or disapprobation of those she loved. Still, it might seem cold and indifferent if she did *not* write to Jack; so in the shortest, simplest manner she told him that she had fled from—she scarce knew what, for she had been well and kindly treated, but she wanted to be independent, to work for herself. Then she begged him not to trouble about her, as she was safe and well.

This missive the post, with its swift punctuality, carried to Leyton's quarters in the north-west of London; and there it lay, for he had asked his chum, Ardill, to look in and forward his letters, as he distrusted his landlady's accuracy and caligraphy. Now Ardill himself went out of town, and as Jack's letters were few and far between—save those on business, which were addressed to the studio—his friend omitted to call for a few days after his return.

Meantime Leyton found Paris more interesting than ever after a long absence, and there was persuaded by a friend to run down with him to have a look at the famous cathedral at Chartres; altogether he was away more than a month.

Mrs. Keene kept Myra informed of how things

went at the hotel. Within a week after his arrival, the guest of whom she was so suspicious took his departure; and Mrs. Keene had the courage to call on Mrs. Dallas with the intention of asking if she had news of Miss Myra. But Mrs. Dallas was in her room, and suffering too severely from nervous exhaustion to see anyone. Mrs. Dwyer, however, who came up to speak with her, gave a good deal of information.

"She is real bad," said the landlady; "she can get no tidings of the poor young lady. It's very curious, for she has put advertisements in the papers, and set detectives after her, and what not! As for young Ashby, he has gone off abroad; whether to look for Miss Dallas or for change of air, *I* don't know. He looked bad enough for anything! It's a curious business, ma'am, as ever I knew!—and you won't stop and have a cup of tea? Well, I'm sure the poor young lady has my best wishes, *if that* will do her any good!"

CHAPTER XIX.

FOUND.

It was a beautiful May that year, and London was looking its very best. The windows and balconies in the more fashionable quarters were full of flowers, and the roll of carriages ceased not by day nor by night.

Dinner engagements crowded on Mr. Wardlaw, from which he was able to make a selection, and sharpen his wits by contact with all that was choicest and brightest in his immediate world. He was sitting at breakfast one soft, sunny morning in his comfortable apartments and opposite to him sat Cecil Forrester, who was up in town for a few days.

Forrester had not yet found either a house or a "flat" to suit him. Indeed, for the present, he was greatly in love with his country life, and interested in his improvements. He had dropped in to break-

fast with his ex-guardian, as it was the most likely time to find him at home and disengaged.

"Take some more strawberries?" Wardlaw was saying. "Breakfast is far and away the best time to eat fruit. You seem to be going ahead considerably down at Wickham; it will be a charming place in a year or two."

"Yes, I flatter myself it will; but the workmen are deuced slow, and——"

He was interrupted by the entrance of the servant with a card. Wardlaw glanced at it.

"Leyton, by Jove!" he exclaimed; then to the servant with animation, "Show him in at once." He rose and advanced to the door as Leyton, looking fresh and brown, came in.

"Delighted to see you, my dear boy! When did you come back?"

"I arrived about an hour ago, and thought I might venture to call at this ungodly hour, before I went off due north to my own diggings, as I want to hear what is going on. Captain Forrester, this is an unexpected pleasure!" and they shook hands.

"Sit down, and have some breakfast," continued Wardlaw.

"Thank you, I have breakfasted."

"Well, I suppose you want to know how your show has been going on? I can tell you you have made a hit; the reviews have been most favourable."

"Yes, better than I expected. Most of them have been sent to me, and I have sold some of the pictures fairly well."

"You will be able to ask decent prices now."

The conversation ran on in the same strain for some minutes, Forrester only throwing in monosyllables from time to time while he glanced at the paper. At last there was a pause, when Forrester, looking up, exclaimed, "What odd advertisements one finds in this second column. There's one, or rather, two here, which have appeared for three or four days, and excite my curiosity considerably: 'Missing since the 8th instant, a young lady, supposed to be acting under mental excitement. She is above middle height, slight in figure, and about nineteen years of age; blue eyes, auburn hair, and a small mole on left of chin; dressed in mourning, and wearing black straw hat, trimmed with black lace and ribbon. Any information which may lead to her discovery and

restoration to her friends will be handsomely rewarded. Address, W. B., Dempster's Private Inquiry Office.' "

"That's rather an ordinary kind of thing!" remarked Leyton carelessly, though he had listened attentively enough.

"The other is more remarkable," continued Forrester. "'The young lady who asked a gentleman what o'clock it was, in a hansom, near Kensington Station, about a fortnight ago, is earnestly requested to send her address to G. D., Box No. 352, *Times* Office, as she may hear something to her advantage.' Now I wonder if these have anything to do with each other?"

"Impossible to say," put in Leyton.

"I am not so sure," returned Forrester. "The fact is, I believe I have met this blue-eyed young lady rambling about my own woods."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Wardlaw with some eagerness. "Tell me about the *rencontre*, I will tell you after why I want to know."

"Well," began Forrester, "I was walking through that part of the woods down by the stream which runs through them, not far from the gate on the

Redworth road, when I came upon a young lady who had been sketching. Her drawing things were on the ground, and she had risen from a camp-stool to speak with a rascally-looking tramp, who was stretching out his hand in a threatening manner. Of course, I came up pretty quick, and asked him how he dared to trespass on my grounds, and why he was molesting the lady.

“‘ He will not believe that I have no more money,’ she said quietly enough, but there was an air of restrained fear about her. ‘I only had twopence, and I gave it to him; but he was not satisfied!’ While she spoke the tramp fled. I didn’t follow him, he was too far before I noticed he was gone; so I expressed my regret that the fair artist should have been disturbed on my territory. She looked at me very straight. I never saw a girl give so steady a glance, and yet the eyes were soft enough. ‘Then you are Captain Forrester?’ she asked. I acknowledged my identity, whereupon she said she feared she was a trespasser, too. I told her she was, for no right of way existed through that part of the woods. You know, I can’t make smooth speeches to women, that’s the reason they bore me. I don’t

dislike them, of course, but they are a nuisance! However, I felt I must be civil to this girl; she was not exactly pretty, but nice and elegant-looking; so I added that *she* might come through as much as she liked, and I helped her to pick up her traps, and looked at the drawing. It seemed to me that it was uncommonly good. Of course, I am no great judge, but it was exactly like the place, with a glimpse of an old wooden bridge. It's very near the place I wanted *you* to paint, Leyton."

"Yes, yes—go on," said Leyton impatiently.

"I got very curious, and asked her if she knew the country. No; she was staying in the neighbourhood for the first time. So I jumped to the conclusion that she was staying with the Warrens of Combe—they have writers and artists and all those sort of people staying there. I asked if she came from Combe. She laughed pleasantly and said—

"‘Oh, no; I am with Miss Foley. I am, I think, going to be her assistant.’

"I could not help saying, ‘The deuce you are!’ for she was quite a lady. Then she said she was much obliged to me, and badè me good-morning.

However, I offered to walk back with her, as the tramp might turn up again. She accepted simply, as if it was quite the most natural thing in the world. I never felt so much at home and comfortable with a girl before. We had quite a nice walk and talk. She said she was so sorry she had been frightened, for she had not finished her sketch, and she did not think she could go there again. I offered to meet her any time she liked and mount guard. She took it all naturally, and made no bother. She said that if a Miss Letitia could come with her she need not trouble me; so I suggested that she might come with or without Miss Letitia, and I should be there about three o'clock. We parted just outside the town; for those infernal gossips would have raised no end of a dust if the Squire of Wickham had been seen with the bookseller's assistant."

"Well," ejaculated Wardlaw, "and next day?"

"She was there, sure enough, with a funny old soul, whom I shall remember all my life—one of a brace of sisters that keep the library in Redworth—and she was drawing away like fun. I did not stay long, but I got some hints out of the old one.

Miss Smith was a charming artist. She had made a lovely picture of the ruins, which was framed and in the shop window ; so I asked if the present production was for sale, and felt like a bashful idiot until she (Miss Smith) said straight out, as coolly as possible —

“‘I should be very glad, if you think it worth buying.’

“So I said I would ; but we were in a difficulty about the price. I did not know what to offer, and she did not know what to ask ; so we agreed that I was to show it to an artist friend of mine—yourself, Leyton. I saw the other sketches in the shop window. I’d like to bid for the whole lot ; but we’ll settle that when you come down. Then we had a little more talk ; and she bade me good-morning in a sweet, quiet way. But I don’t think any fellow would have stayed after she dismissed him. I never fancied any girl so much—there is something so tranquil and friendly about her. Now, I can’t help thinking that she is the missing young lady,” tapping the paper ; “but her brains are right as a trivet—never met a more collected damsel.”

Leyton grew more and more uneasy as Forrester proceeded.

"I, too, seem to recognise the lady, only it could not be——" he said.

"And I believe *I* have the key to the riddle," observed Wardlaw. "Here is my tale."

He then related the story already told by Myra—of her insisting on sharing the hansom engaged by a gentleman—to which Forrester and Leyton gave ear with much surprise.

"So," he concluded, "we parted at Oxford Circus. She went away east, and I saw her no more; but I have felt uncomfortable about her ever since—she was so young, so resolute, yet so frightened. As soon as I saw that advertisement, I put in the other. I fancied she was inclined to put some faith in my grey hairs; but it has been out for more than a week, and no notice has been taken. Now I know who it is."

"Who?" exclaimed both the other men together.

"Why, that niece of poor Edward Dallas, who, it seems, has taken fright at God knows what and run away. She has been missing since the 8th of

May—that was the date on which my young friend took possession of my cab and myself. For that matter, I fell in with her just at the corner of Melford Road, where Mrs. Dallas lives; and when Lady Shirland told me of the flight, I discussed with myself whether I should give information or not. Somehow I could not bring myself to betray the poor child; so I put in that appeal, hoping to attract her attention and offer myself as an intermediary.”

“Myra Dallas run away! My God, what has become of her?” cried Leyton, greatly disturbed.

“If she is the girl I met in the woods, she seems safe and sound, and all right,” said Forrester.

“And if she is, she ought to be something like your second cousin once removed, Forrester, if her parents had not omitted a certain ceremony.”

“No, really? How awkward! She is, then, I suppose, that daughter of Fred Dallas who was adopted by the Colonel’s widow.”

“But how can she have managed? She hadn’t a farthing—not even a postage stamp,” cried Leyton.

"Then the sooner I buy those drawings the better," remarked Forrester.

"Of course, we cannot be sure that your young artist *is* Miss Dallas," put in Wardlaw.

"I fancy she is. But what can have frightened her out of the aunt's house? It must have been the confounded son!" exclaimed Leyton.

"I cannot understand the woman," said Wardlaw, thoughtfully.

"No, nor I," returned Leyton, taking his hat. "But I shall soon find some clue to Myra, poor child! I can't stand the notion of her wandering about penniless and forlorn."

"Where are you off to?" exclaimed Wardlaw.

"To see a woman who will be sure to know something of her."

"And she hasn't any money at all?" asked Forrester. "Hadn't her father any?"

"If he had, and did not will it to his daughter, of course all would have been his brother's. But I must be off."

"Let us know the result of your inquiries," cried Wardlaw, as he left the room.

"It is a bad business her having no money,"

said Forrester when he was alone with his ex-guardian.

"Deuced bad," replied Wardlaw.

"It can be remedied."

"No doubt it can be," said Wardlaw shortly.

"I'll talk to you about it when Leyton discovers where she is," was Forrester's conclusion; and they turned to other subjects, occasionally reverting to the curious disappearance of Myra, an event which made a deep impression on both.

Leaving the house, Leyton walked swiftly towards Belgrave Road, looking eagerly for a cab, when, to his surprise and annoyance, a brougham from which a lady was nodding and shaking her hand suddenly drew up beside the pavement in front of him, and he recognised Dorothea Browne.

"Oh, Mr. Leyton, I had no idea you had come back, and it's so curious happening to meet you at this hour. I am going to spend the day at Richmond with the De Courcy Joneses; that is the reason I am going out so early. We are busy rehearsing a pastoral play that is to astonish everyone. I am so glad your exhibition has been such a success."

"Thank you very much. But I am in a tremendous hurry, and there does not seem to be a cab about."

"Oh, come in, I will drive you as far as Piccadilly; you will find plenty there."

Hoping to save time, Leyton jumped in.

"I suppose you have heard of all the trouble poor Mrs. Dallas has had," resumed Dorothea. "She has been almost out of her mind. That ungrateful creature, Myra, has run away, and no one can find her."

"Wardlaw has just mentioned it to me," returned Leyton, guardedly.

"Yes, it must be quite three weeks ago that poor Mrs. Dallas came to us in a fearful state of agitation. It seems she had a scene with poor Lionel Ashby, whom she refused in the most unexpected manner, after encouraging him—nay, more than encouraging him; and then without rhyme or reason she fled. Someone must have arranged a plan for her. She is either insane, or has found a lover she prefers to Lionel. Mrs. Dallas, who is always charitable, thinks she is insane."

"That remains to be proved, Miss Browne. We must first hear what Myra has to say."

"Oh, Myra! Yes, to be sure. You were old friends. But do you think you will be able to find her?"

"I'll try."

"Are you sure you do not know where she is?"
—with playful malice.

"Miss Browne!"—indignantly—"what do you think me capable of?"

"Oh, pray forgive me if I have made a mistake; I am so thoughtless. You must not be angry. I suppose you will be in town now till the end of the season. We have a musical party on the 24th; I hope you will come. I think we have sent you a card."

"Thank you a thousand times; I'll be sure to come, and I'll not take you any further out of your way. Hi, hansom!" He pulled the check-string, and was standing on the pavement and raising his hat before she could say good-bye.

"Ill-natured, elderly kitten," thought Leyton, as he sped north-east. "It is *impossible* Myra could have a lover—yet why not? Lovers are very irrepressible atoms, and Myra is a sort of girl that

—No, she has fled from, not *to*, a lover. That young darkey is a presumptuous hound; I'd like to have the thrashing of him. My God! what a position for a tender, delicate girl to be placed in! Mrs. Keene will know something about her; Mrs. Keene is a trump! It is most extraordinary that she has evaded detection for more than three weeks; someone must have helped her. Why, why did she not write to me? Her avoidance of me looks rather as if there *was* a lover at the bottom of it, yet there is no reason she should not have consulted me respecting him also."

So Leyton tormented himself till he reached Gilbert Street.

"Mrs. Keene was at home, and would be with Mr. Leyton immediately."

He paced the comfortable parlour with devouring impatience, till the door opened and Mrs. Keene came forward with almost juvenile rapidity. She held out a fat hand exclaiming, with great earnestness, "Thank God! Oh, thank God! you have come at last, sir!" and dropped into a chair.

* * * * *

The advertisements which gave rise to this con-

versation had soon attracted the attention of Miss Letitia, who quickly carried the paper to Myra, and they discussed the matter with much nervous excitement.

To be publicly advertised seemed to be the most appalling crisis. Myra felt she could not move outside the house without attracting immediate detection; that the universal finger of scorn would be pointed at the girl who ran away, and was pilloried in the public prints. When, however, Wardlaw's appeal appeared, she, Myra, was deeply interested.

"It must be that nice, kind gentleman who let me go with him in the cab," she said; "I *should* like to write and thank him, and say I am safe and well. He seemed to think I was going to do something very dreadful."

When, however, Miss Foley came to give her opinion, she soothed Myra's fears considerably.

"In the first place, my dear Miss Myra, very few people here read the *Times*. The local paper is enough for most of them, and those that do don't look at the advertisements. Moreover, if they did, they would never dream of any missing young lady venturing into the country. It would not be a bad

plan to put a coloured flower or a feather in your hat, it would take off the *mourningified* look. You just go out with Letitia, and draw as usual. No one will ever think about you."

Ultimately Miss Foley's counsels prevailed. Myra added a pretty bow of pale blue ribbon to her hat, and tied another round her throat, which quite took off the mourning aspect of her costume.

Her meeting with Forrester was a source of some excitement to Miss Letitia, who was disposed to see a budding romance in any casual encounter between two unmarried people. But Myra was quite prosaic on the subject; she was very pleased with Forrester, it is true, but chiefly because he promised to be a purchaser of her sketches.

Though this stay in Miss Foley's peaceful, comfortable home was, indeed, a breathing space and a refreshment to Myra, she could not refrain from speculating as to the cause of Leyton's silence. He had been so kind, so interested in her rather unpromising future, that she wondered he did not write to advise her, at least. She did not reckon on his not having received her letter. Of course, she did not expect him to give her much of his valuable

time, but a few minutes—enough for a letter—she did expect, and, in truth, she felt a good deal wounded by his silence. When alone she used to drop her pen, her pencil, her needle—whatever occupied her fingers, and think of the old happy days while she was still a child, and wonder why it had been her fate to be so destitute of all ordinary ties, and ask herself if she could ever be forced back to live with Mrs. Dallas and Lionel.

But Myra was no morbid mourner of the inevitable. She made herself pleasant and useful to her kind hosts, and applied herself diligently to learn something of their business, though the sisters smiled at the notion of her being their assistant. At present, indeed, Myra did not like to venture into the shop, but she quite looked forward to taking her place there. This stay at Redworth was the first taste of home she had had since her father was taken from her, and it was as rain unto a thirsty land.

The morning after Leyton had heard of Myra's flight was overcast and showery, so she sat at home in the pleasant drawing-room busily engaged in making a copy of the sketch she had taken in the old Priory, for which Miss Foley foretold a large

demand. She was absorbed in her occupation when Keziah, the old servant, opened the door, and said solemnly, "A gentleman wants to speak to you, miss."

"A gentleman! what sort of a gentleman!" cried Myra, starting up in wild affright. "Do not let anyone come in."

"Is there no admittance for me, Myra?" said a delightfully familiar voice, as Leyton passed Keziah and entered the room.

"Oh, Jack—dear Jack, how good of you to come!" cried Myra, flying to him with outstretched hands, which he held kindly for a moment or two.

"What can you have thought of me?" he exclaimed. "Do you know I never had your letter till yesterday evening, when I arrived from Paris. The idiots at my rooms never sent it on. And you didn't believe I should desert you, Myra?"

"Oh, no. I never thought you meant to be unkind; but I had no business to worry you, or right to suppose you would trouble about me. Oh, I am so glad to see you! How did you find me out?"

“Through Mrs. Keene, of course ; but I heard of your flight by accident. I’ll tell you all about it later.”

They sat down, Myra’s usually pale cheeks delicately flushed with pleasure, her eyes sparkling with undisguised joy.

She could not tell—indeed, she never dreamed of trying to analyse her own emotions—why it was that the sound of Leyton’s voice, the glance of his eyes, the touch of his hand, filled her heart with life and strength and courage ; but it was so. The whole world was changed since he had come.

“You seem a new creature, Myra,” said Leyton, looking at her with grave inspection. “There is colour in your cheeks and light in your eyes.”

“That is partly because I am so glad to see you,” she returned, meeting his eyes with frank, happy composure. “But I do feel better here. The sense of being free, of going where I like, is so delicious ; though I am always afraid I am very ungrateful to Mrs. Dallas.”

“Come, Myra, tell me the whole story. What put you up to run away ? The last time I saw

you, you looked like a spiritless ‘bird in the snare of the fowler.’”

“I felt like it,” said Myra, with a thoughtful smile; and she went on to relate her escape and adventures.

Leyton listened with deep attention. At the end he thought for a moment; then, leaning forward, he looked gravely into her eyes, and asked—

“What was the immediate cause of your flight? You have not told me quite all, Myra.”

“No; not quite. But I promised Mrs. Dwyer never to tell something which she repeated to me. If she would agree to my telling you, I would at once.”

“Very well, Myra. I daresay we could get her permission. I shall ask her some day. You were really very prompt and plucky about your escape; but it was energy thrown away. You might have walked out of your aunt’s house, and she could not have prevented you.”

“Is that really true, Jack?”

“It is, indeed.”

“But I never could have done so. I could *run* away; I could not have *walked* away. Oh! when

I found Lionel Ashby was running after me, I felt wild with terror—I dreaded him so much.”

“Why?” asked Leyton, a smile twinkling in his brown eyes. “Because the poor beggar was in love with you?”

“It was rather stupid of me, I suppose. I ought, perhaps, to have been grateful to him; but it is strange how I always feared his hatred. Though he talked of love, I always felt he hated me too.”

She shuddered as she spoke.

“You describe the devil’s own mixture,” said Leyton. “Now, Myra,” he recommenced after a short pause, “you must not hide any more. You must write to your aunt—a nice, amiable letter, you know; say you were so distressed at causing discomfort about her son—anything you like; that you felt it was better to leave her, and that you had not the courage to do so openly. Express your wish to be on friendly terms, but be very decided about leading an independent life.”

“Very well, Jack. I now feel how foolish I have been, and am so ashamed of the trouble I have given.”

"It was not an unnatural mistake; but I want you to be clear of Mrs. Dallas. I don't like the tone of her advertisement. By the way, what can you do when you break with Mrs. Dallas?"

"I hope Miss Foley will keep me as her assistant. I am not clever about such things, but I will be careful."

"My God! what an extraordinary turn of fate, that you should be here assistant in a petty shop while your cousin should be the squire—lord of the manor—within a stone's throw. No, Myra, this will not do."

"And why not? These kind people like me; I may be as a daughter to them; and as I am quite, quite alone, and belong to no one, I am fortunate to find such a home and to maintain myself without troubling anyone. Let me stay here, Jack—I am very glad to be at rest."

"My dear Myra," cried Leyton, inexpressibly touched, "I have no right to interfere with you; but it is too soon to talk of plans. You must lose no time in putting yourself right with Mrs. Dallas. Afterwards we shall see. So you have been drawing," coming over to the table and

looking at her work. "This is nice—very nice, indeed."

"There are delightful places all about for sketching. I have done some trees and a bridge; and, do you know, Captain Forrester was so nice; he found me trespassing on his ground, and told me I might come whenever I pleased; and he is going to buy my drawings, Jack, only he wants to ask some artist friend what they are worth. Perhaps *you* are that friend."

"Very likely. We will make him pay through the nose. Now, Myra, go and write your letter, and may I read it? for I want you to be very careful."

This important undertaking occupied some time, and though on the whole Myra followed Leyton's advice, she insisted on putting in some passages he thought unnecessary.

"You are rather deceptive, Myra," he exclaimed, when their task was at last accomplished. "You seem as soft as wax or snow, and yet you can assert yourself in the most amazing manner."

"You don't think me obstinate?"

"I think you everything that is good and sweet."

Myra laughed merrily at this unstinted praise, but somehow her laughter did not please Leyton. Had he made himself ridiculous?

"Now I must see your good friends here, as you wish it. I ought, you know."

So Miss Foley and Miss Letitia were asked to come to the drawing-room, and heard Leyton's views with deep interest and a certain amount of deference.

"I am *that* glad," exclaimed the elder sister, "to think there is to be no more skulking and hiding; and you may be sure, sir, Miss Dallas is heartily welcome as long as ever she needs to stay. We'll miss her sorely when she does go."

"Not more than she'll miss you," returned Leyton. "Now, Myra, I am going to have a day in the country and not return till to-morrow morning. Suppose you come and show me these famous woods. I was to have painted a picture for Forrester to match the 'Autumn Morning' you liked so much. I have never had time to attempt it; let us choose the scene to-day."

Could my weak pen describe the charm of

that walk? No; nor could all the pens of all the poets fully convey the subtle joy, the magic rhythm of sympathy, of heavenly harmony, between two hearts on which was dawning the sense of each other's beauty and incomparable fitness.

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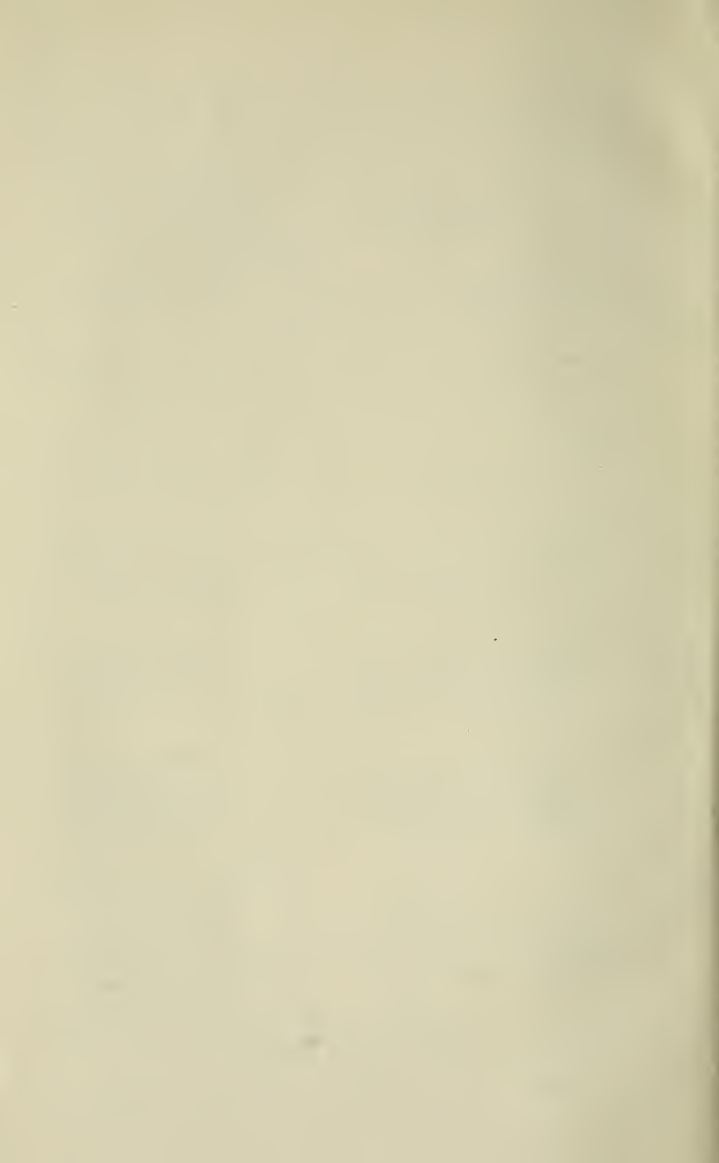
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